

The authentic sequel to the great TV series



Nerys Monks
BLAKES 7

AFTERLIFE

TONY ATTWOOD

Compiler of the Programme Guide



Over ten million people watched the dramatic final episode of the BLAKE'S 7 TV series. And not one could ever forget — or fathom — the final catastrophic shootout on Gauda Prime.

Did Blake's death really mean the end of the fight against the evil forces of the Federation? Was the vulnerable thief Vila killed — or just wounded? What happened to the computer Orac? Would the scheming Servalan regain her old power-base? And what of Avon himself, the unbeatable, unpredictable paranoid who had ended it all? AFTERLIFE is Tony Attwood's brilliant continuation of the Blake's 7 story.

Also available
THE BLAKE'S 7 PROGRAMME GUIDE

Terry Nation's
BLAKE'S 7:
AFTERLIFE

‘Commissioner...’ the Captain pushed on. ‘For some time the planet had been used by enemies of our Federation. We have had them under close surveillance and had infiltrated their command structure. Our enemies were planning a rebellion and were trying to attract other dissident elements to their base. All of the rebels were to be rounded up.’

‘Rebels.’ Servalan sneered at the word. ‘Who were these great outlaws that senior officers of the Federation had to rush half way across the Galaxy in order to have them arrested?’

‘One was the rebel leader Blake, Commissioner.’

The sneer froze on Servalan’s face. ‘Did you see Blake?’

‘Yes, Commissioner. I supervised the identification of his body. He was dead...’

Terry Nation's

*Blake's 7
Afterlife*

Tony Attwood



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Introduction

I'm moved to write this to try and clarify a couple of points that relate to the writing of "Afterlife".

The book came about when it became clear that there was not likely to be a 5th series of "Blake's 7" at least for another couple of years, because of contractual arguments which by and large had nothing to do with the series, but were happening 'off stage'.

Having written "The Programme Guide" for the series, I was asked to write a book which could be turned into four episodes.

My instructions were to work with Avon and Vila and to keep within the format — but not to introduce anything that would cause too much confusion if the 5th series were made.

As the novel developed I suggested that we could consider doing 2 novels — the second being "State of Mind", which would resolve the issues in "Afterlife" — which are left hanging ready for the next events.

This idea was welcomed, but then those contractual arguments got in the way.

A lot of hardcore fans didn't like "Afterlife" - criticising both what I did with the characters and what happened in the storyline, but to balance that (and to keep me feeling moderately happy) there was a lot of nice stuff from people who just watched the show but never subscribed to the fanzines etc.

If you enjoyed "Afterlife" — I'm glad you did. If not — well, sorry. I thought it worked ok, but we all have our own style.

A. L. Attwood

June 2005

Prologue

In the beginning there were six men and women. Outlaws, criminals, they took on the grandest task of their time – to destroy a Galaxy-wide Empire, known simply as the Federation.

Deported to a penal colony, fate smiled on the prisoners for one brief moment as, led by Roj Blake, they captured an alien space vessel and found themselves in possession of the *Liberator* – the fastest fighting ship known in the Galaxy. Aided by the seventh member of their team, an on-board master computer known as Zen, they began their impossible mission.

For a while their luck held as they stumbled by chance on Orac. Invented by Ensor, it was the most powerful computer ever designed, able to intercept messages from every other computer in the Federation. But then their problems began. Gan, one of the original team, was killed as Blake tried to attack the Federation's computer centre. Then Blake himself was seriously injured as the *Liberator's* crew formed an unlikely alliance with the Federation to combat an invasion from Andromeda. Another crew member, Jenna, was also lost, and although more rebels were found to replace the depleted forces, eventually even the *Liberator* itself was destroyed.

By now only two of the original crew survived. One was Avon, probably the greatest computer genius the Galaxy had ever seen. Sentenced to the penal colony for attempting to steal five hundred million credits from the Federation banking cartel, he never fully lost interest in the idea. The other

was Vila, a brilliant thief, but lacking the bravery that should have accompanied the role that history had created for him.

With a new ship and a different crew, Avon and Vila continued to fight the Federation until their hiding place was discovered. Then they once more travelled the Galaxy to find Gauda Prime, the reputed refuge of their original leader, Roj Blake.

Despite the destruction of their ship Blake was found, but at that very moment the Federation attacked. As the shooting broke out Avon, seeing a trap, killed Blake. With his ship gone, his crew dead, Avon, it seemed, had finally lost the ultimate battle...

Korell looked down at the prisoner on the bunk. She smiled languidly, resting her shapely frame against the side of the door, which remained wide open. Beyond, the prisoner could catch a glimpse of the corridor painted grey with white, red and green lines indicating routes to unseen destinations. No one moved along the walkways. No guards stood at the door. The room was in standard Federation prison format, painted grey with a single bunk, no chairs, no windows and just enough room for the average man to walk up and down, six paces at a time. The door was solid steel, doubly reinforced, grey like the rest of the room. When it closed it moved easily along automatically oiled runners. It would continue to open and close noiselessly for two hundred years, if anyone bothered to use it.

‘You never try to escape,’ Korell stated. Her voice was calm and gentle, with a hint of deep knowledge.

The prisoner continued lying on his back, staring impassively at the ceiling. Every four or five seconds his eyelids flickered; otherwise there was no perceptible movement beyond his slow regular breathing.

The silence was complete. The air in the room was fresh, refurbished from the outside through tiny filters built into the walls. It was all standard prison issue; all except Korell. She seemed prepared to wait all day for a reaction.

Eventually she was rewarded. The prisoner spoke. ‘The trap is too obvious,’ he said. ‘To run you need somewhere to go. I don’t seem to have

that possibility at the moment.’ He paused. When Korell didn’t reply he added, ‘You have all the cards. You make the move.’

Korell retained her smile, indeed it was a continuous part of her make-up. But her eyes never moved from her prisoner. The man, she knew, had spent most of his time like this for the past five months. Twice a day Korell disturbed him with food followed by some rapid exercise up and down the corridor, then back into the cell for whatever conversation the prisoner would make. The routine had never varied. Most prisoners would have cracked long ago; the loneliness, the contradictions of a prison with only one warder, a door left unlocked during visits, the lack of knowledge... But something was keeping this man going. This prisoner was different.

To the prisoner Korell had been an unexpected and unknown visitor. Totally relaxed and self confident, she seemed so sure of what she was doing that she always had the air of someone who could afford to wait for ever. She had as long as the prisoner would take to give her Orac.

‘Let’s talk about you,’ announced Korell after another long pause. The prisoner levered himself up and sat on the side of his bunk, but said nothing.

‘You’ve had no thoughts of escape for five months because for only the second time in your life you are looking inwards.’ It was a diagnosis not a question. Korell grinned; a grin imposed on top of a smile. She paused again, watching her prisoner intently. She sensed rather than saw a movement, a suggestion that this was the right track. Encouraged, she continued.

‘For years you have been living on a knife edge, just avoiding death. The pressure has been constant. You could have stood all that if it hadn’t been for some memories. They keep flooding back.

‘You live with the memory of the people you trusted. The only people you trusted in your entire life. They betrayed you.’

The meanings were harsh, but the words seemed soft.

The prisoner looked up. 'People?' he asked mildly. Korell's speech was having an effect.

'You loved the girl. You nearly died for her. And she was an agent of Servalan.' Another pause. The prisoner lay back down. Vitality seemed to drain from his face minute by minute.

'And the man, Blake. You pretended to despise him, but you admired his purpose.'

'Blake was a fool.'

'But you thought you knew him. You thought you could predict him. In the end you couldn't be sure. Did Blake betray you?' It seemed like a real question.

The prisoner allowed himself a brief smile. 'It's a good story,' he told Korell.

'And true?' For once Korell's response seemed a little too fast.

'More or less. What do you want?'

'There's no hurry,' Korell announced. 'We'll talk tomorrow.'

'I'd like to tell you now,' replied the prisoner. His voice was fragile.

'Tomorrow,' Korell repeated and turned her back on her captive.

The gentle hiss indicated that the door was locked. The prisoner lay on his bunk, a faint smile still on his face. Months before he had checked and double checked the room for watching devices, but there were none. Prisoners on Gauda Prime had obviously been run of the mill murderers, who didn't need watching. His face would not be seen.

He knew he now had little time left to wait. His move must come with Korell's next visit, when his jailer thought him to be at his weakest. Until her return he could do nothing but wait. That was no problem: he'd had a lot of practice recently.

He closed his eyes and re-thought his campaign.

One hour later his reverie was broken by a sound outside. A flash of annoyance crossed the prisoner's face. He had misjudged Korell. He had

been sure that his jailer would insist on waiting until the morning to make him finally submit. An early start meant that Korell was less confident than he had supposed. In time-honoured tradition the prisoner pressed himself against the wall next to the sliding door and waited.

As the door opened he allowed his surprise to register for just a split second before hitting not Korell but a Federation guard. In that brief moment he diverted his blow to the kidneys rather than the side of the neck as he had planned, merely bringing the guard to the floor rather than rendering him unconscious. Guards, although not bright, did tend to know if there were others like themselves around.

With a vicious twist he brought his arm under the guard's neck and pushed a fist into his back. To the guard it could have been any one of a variety of weapons.

'The wrong type of movement on your part could lead to serious consequences,' the prisoner announced quietly. 'Just take your helmet off slowly; it would be helpful if we could have a talk.'

As he spoke he dragged the guard away from the door and touched the plate to its side to close it. The guard certainly didn't seem to want to offend the prisoner with any rapid movements at all. He was quivering in his all-black uniform, which upon closer inspection appeared to be completely the wrong size. Gently the helmet was removed and the prisoner found himself looking at the back of a head that he knew rather well.

'Vila,' he announced simply.

Vila didn't turn for the simple reason that he was petrified. He would know the voice of Avon anywhere. During their last few months together Avon had tried to sacrifice Vila in order to save his own skin, and towards the end Vila had gained the distinct impression that Avon was investigating the possibilities of rapidly ridding himself of the whole of his crew. If Avon had turned into a homicidal maniac Vila didn't particularly want to get in his way.

Recognising Vila's problem Avon let go his grip and allowed the thief to fall to the floor. Vila crawled a few feet and turned to look up in dismay. The short cropped hair had grown longer and the weak chin revealed a few days growth of beard, but otherwise Vila looked much the same.

'I think you ought to try to be a bit nicer to someone who has just rescued you from prison,' he said.

'It was rather hard to tell who you were inside that uniform,' Avon replied. 'Although I should have realised it was you – you don't quite have that aggressive authority which is the hallmark of the average Federation thug. However, there are a number of locks you could open between here and the outside world, and I rather suspect the average guard wouldn't be able to open them quite as quickly as you.'

Vila looked annoyed. "'Quite as quickly?'" he demanded. 'What do you mean "quite as quickly"? I can open locks in seconds which take the manufacturers four weeks, and that's when they have the key.'

But Avon had already tired of the thief's bravado. 'I don't want a race,' he said, 'just escape.'

Vila got up and turned to Avon with a flash of professional pride. 'No problem – it's all done. You can walk straight out of here into the outside world, which I might tell you is saturated since this is the rainy season. And rainy season means rain. Non-stop, endless...'

'Thank you for the weather report. Now can we get out?'

'... without bumping into a single Federation Guard – in fact without bumping into anyone.'

'You aren't going to tell me you killed them all?' demanded Avon, warily stepping to the lock mechanism and opening it once more.

'No, not exactly...'

'Good, because your abilities as a liar are far below those you possess as a thief.'

‘But I did open the main hatch. The place is deserted. Not one single regular space ship has taken off or landed during the past four months and only a couple of flyers have come and gone in all the time since you invoked universal mayhem. And now there’s not a single guard on the base. What did you do to them Avon? Threaten to give a lecture to the assembled multitudes on the subject of your ego?’

Looking out from his cell, in order to check on the thief’s claims Avon ignored the jibes. The corridor led away left and right ending both ways in simple T-junctions with no indication of what lay beyond. Sadly for Avon these initial attempts at exploration failed to stop Vila’s boasting. ‘I thought it was about time I came in and saw what was going on,’ he said nonchalantly, ‘and of course I was looking for a way of rescuing the others...’

‘But you didn’t find them.’

‘Er – no...’

‘Not surprising after five months. What were you doing out there Vila, counting the trees?’

With that Avon slowly led the way out of the cell and along the passageway. He chose the left corridor, turning left at the junction and left again twenty yards further on. He could have asked Vila for directions but he preferred to trust more to his own judgement and analysis. The Control Room would be at the centre of the base – these manoeuvres ought to get them there. If the route was different from Vila’s so much the better, for anyone relying on Vila and Avon’s return by the same route would be disappointed.

Still desperate to prove his worth and rapidly realising that Avon had become the first viable way of getting off Gauda Prime that had offered itself in the past five months, Vila tagged along behind trying hard to make the most of history. ‘You didn’t expect me to rush straight in did you? I had

to get a good picture of the area – watch out for troop cover – that’s why I took the uniform...’

The story wasn’t impressing Avon. It was also clear from the way he was holding his hands Avon was feeling the lack of a weapon, and in that respect Vila was unable to help. He knew of Avon’s good nose for danger and his caution made Vila feel more nervous than he really wanted to feel. Walking through the short corridors he began to wonder if the near starvation he had endured outside the settlement dome these last five months had been worth it. Maybe he should have stayed in the rain. Another week and he’d have had no more worries.

Suddenly the corridors ended; the main Control Room appeared ahead of them. It was circular and spacious, the control desks and panels ringed by a raised walkway. Functional pillars supported the roof. Chairs were set behind the desks. The blood and the bodies had gone. Otherwise it was as Avon remembered it. ‘Avon,’ said Vila gloomily casting his eyes around the all too familiar scene, ‘What happened?’

Avon looked around with an annoyed expression. ‘Vila, I am grateful to you for unlocking the cell door for me, but my gratitude does not extend to standing around in wide open spaces waiting for someone to attack while you question me at the top of your voice.’ He moved off quickly looking down each of the three corridors in turn that fed into the room.

Vila started to follow, realised what Avon was doing and then stood resolutely in the centre of the circle refusing to be appeased. ‘Relax,’ he said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. ‘There’s nobody here; I know because I’ve been out and about while you’ve been sitting in your cell playing patience.’

‘Correction,’ said Avon tersely. ‘I have been held prisoner, whilst you, I suspect, have been drinking every drop of adrenalin and soma within twenty miles.’

Avon decided to move off down a passageway opposite to that from which they entered. Seeing that this was more than just another tactical investigation Vila ran to catch Avon up but still reached the main door a little behind. Its green frame slanting inwards to match the curvature of the dome had been slid to one side and rain was splashing in. Avon looked cautiously out into the downpour.

‘I told you it was raining,’ said Vila obviously. ‘You don’t want to go out there.’ He looked out. Through the rain and mist it was just possible to make out endless rows of trees, fast-growing hardwoods which put all their energy into thrusting up to the sky rather than producing leaves. The rain thus poured straight down onto the soil. The resultant mud was bound heavily to the intertwined roots. Deep dark brown rivers ran between the rows. Avon looked but made no reply. Vila continued the monologue. ‘There’s no one out there, there is no one else in here, and I would still like to know what happened, or failing that what is going to happen – or failing that,’ he ended plaintively, ‘anything at all.’

Relaxing slightly, apparently satisfied that they were not being overlooked, Avon turned back to Vila.

‘You are sure you’ve seen no one at all?’

‘For about four months it’s been like I told you.’ Vila was getting exasperated. ‘No people, no guards, no Federation, no ships, and,’ he added as his stomach gave a twinge, ‘no food.’

‘What about the tall girl, long fair hair swept over to one side, civilian clothes, calls herself Korell?’

‘Pretty?’

Despite himself Avon smiled. ‘Yes,’ he said simply.

The answer didn’t seem to please Vila, in fact it made him more depressed than he already was. He said, ‘Oh’ and then said no more but looked wistfully at the rain and the mud. He got to starve in a beaten-up freighter for five months, he thought, whilst Avon got to be interrogated by

a beautiful woman. That was what life seemed to be all about. He contemplated not speaking at all for the next week. Then he spoke. 'The answer is still no. The base is deserted.' Vila paused. The novelty of having someone to talk to was definitely beginning to wear off. At that moment there was a crack from the trees beyond the main hatch.

'Down,' snapped Avon.

Despite all his previous assurances Vila did not need telling. He was already on the floor, lying in a pool of water with drips from the roof of the hatch falling on the back of his neck, as he held his breath. Avon looked out carefully, but could see no sign of life.

'Probably just one of the animals,' observed Vila, trying to give himself back some confidence. 'They always come out in the rain.'

Avon relaxed once more. 'How did you escape?' he asked.

'I was never captured.' Vila replied. 'Instant reflexes.'

'You mean as the firing began you hit the deck?'

'Something like that. No point hanging around being heroic – not twice in one day.'

'And the others? Tarrant, Dayna, Soolin?'

'Do you mean you care? I got the impression you wanted us all dead.' Vila looked at Avon trying to read his thoughts – an impossible task. He answered the question. 'No idea. When I looked up you had been marched out and the others were still on the ground. I crawled into an empty cupboard and waited. By the time I came out everyone had gone. I made for the outside, got wet and let myself into the nearest spaceship. That was the last I saw of anybody until you grabbed me by the throat. One of the other freighters took off from the other side of the clearing just after I got into the ship but that was about it. Apart from the ship that landed.'

Avon looked round sharply. 'Describe it,' he commanded.

'I didn't really see it,' Vila said. 'It came in on the other side of the dome, but from over here, through all the rain, it looked...' He paused as if he

didn't believe it himself. 'It looked round – sort of like a sphere. And it was huge. It was down for about an hour and then took off again. The flyers could have been Tarrant and the rest, or they could have been guards.'

Avon made no further acknowledgement of Vila's information. If he recognised that Vila was, at least for the time being, holding him personally responsible for the presumed deaths of the entire crew of *Scorpio* save themselves he certainly did not show it as he stepped out into the rain.

Avon made straight for the nearest of three small space freighters docked close to the settlement. They were small enough to come down in the clearing without special landing bays. They stood upright, traditional nose cones pointing to the skies awaiting the next take-off. Around the cones were the ramjet intakes – breathers as they were commonly known – pulling in hydrogen for the fusion units at the heart of each ship of this class. At the base were two entry doors, one small for the crew, one about ten times larger for the freight. In one case the loading ramp was down, although the freight door appeared tightly closed. All around the area the ground had been severely burned by the reverse thrust of the fusion jets as the ships had landed. The burning had made the ground solid – the water lay in deep pools looking for somewhere to run to. Avon splashed through and took cover from the rain by the overhanging ledge above the main entry hatch. Vila ran more slowly, and got wetter. As he had discovered five months ago, his boots leaked.

'Just open the hatch,' commanded Avon. Vila tried to act with a superiority he didn't entirely feel. He had unlocked the hatch when he had first hidden in the ship, and had left it that way. One touch on the pressure point and door slid back. The muddy footprints he had left there during his last visit were still all over the floor.

Avon wasn't impressed. 'Why didn't you leave a sign up in case you weren't noticed?' he hissed, with what Vila took to be unnecessary aggravation. 'Stay here out of sight.'

‘Out of sight? You can’t seriously be expecting trouble. Not here. From what?’ Vila moved backwards into the entry bay and took cover. ‘There’s nothing out there Avon.’ He ducked down, scared despite his protestations, as Avon moved away towards the plantations.

Vila did not miss the irony of the situation. How many times in the past five years had he been in this sort of position, acting as look out on one of Avon’s schemes without even knowing what the scheme was – or even where Avon was going? Did nothing ever change in this Galaxy?

Avon ran quickly but carefully through the downpour, the trees clumped closely together towering overhead. Whatever it was in the local soil that made the trees grow fast and tall also inhibited the growth of virtually all the vegetation. The paths between the trees were clear of everything, except mud. With no gun in his hand Avon hoped Vila’s analysis of the situation – never trustworthy at the best of times – was correct. After five minutes he found what he was looking for – one particular tree with a couple of scratch marks on one side. He counted his way past seven more trees, turned and counted a further three, then again seven and finally four. He looked down – there was a small depression in the ground that shouldn’t have been there. Avon pulled the muddy soil away with his bare hands, but to no avail. He knew what he sought was gone.

Retracing his steps Avon felt he had few tricks left to play.

After weathering five months of psychological warfare Vila had blundered in. Orac had been Avon’s one chance of escape from the planet, and Korell must have known all the time. Now he was back to improvisation. He had no lack of faith in his own ability to resolve any situation in his own favour, but like Vila he wondered, if only for a second, when anything was going to change.

Back at the ship Vila heard a movement. It came from behind him – inside the freighter which he was so certain was empty. He cursed himself. Avon was right as ever. Leaving the hatch unlocked had been stupid.

Anxious to try and avoid further problems he moved back a few paces, slipped on the edge of the entry bay floor and went tumbling backwards down the ramp into the mud outside, only to find himself looking up at a tall, elegant, smiling lady with long blonde hair pulled over to one side of her face, standing inside the ship.

By the time Avon returned Vila had gone. Looking down at the muddy footprints on the entry ramp he knew what to expect, but could think of nothing that would put himself into a more positive position apart from walking into the situation. With a mental shrug of the shoulders he entered the ship and made his way cautiously through the freight hold and up the vertical stairways towards the flight deck.

The central control area, like the rest of the ship, was functional and compact. Three sets of control panels were set at desks designed to be operated by the pilot, navigator and captain. The desks were lined up beside each other so each officer could see the master screen and ship computer ahead of them. Vila was sitting in the pilot's chair, his feet on the control panel in front of him, a bottle of liquid nutrients to his lips. Inevitably seated next to him, was Korell gently swinging left and right.

'Come and sit down, Avon,' said the woman. 'After all these months I'm not going to pose a threat to you now.' Korell spoke in her usual relaxed manner. Only her clothes had changed. She was in a practical one piece flying suit. The trousers were tucked into her boots. The boots were covered in mud.

'You might not,' said Avon surveying the flight deck. 'But I might just pose a threat to you.'

'Not without a gun Avon.' Korell was still sitting, still smiling. 'You are pretending to be stupider than you really are...'

'It must be the company I keep – it drags the mentality down being in prison.'

Korell opened negotiations. 'I have Orac, and the key, and you have the code system to get Orac to work again.'

'How did you get the machine?'

'I found Orac because I know a lot about your brain. Your belief in yourself has always been your major strength Avon, but it does leave you vulnerable to anyone with time to find out all about you. If you knew how much data I had accumulated on you you might have been more guarded in what you said... and what you didn't say.'

'You were working for the Federation?'

'For a while yes, but all they are interested in is brute force and destruction on a planetary scale. They've lost interest in the finer points of the human technology.'

'So, an applied social technologist turning your work to practical usage,' said Avon.

'One of the best,' replied Korell in her most relaxed way.

'Not the best?' asked Avon. It was a strange question for him, hinting at sarcasm which was not part of his normal repertoire. Vila stopped drinking for a moment to consider it, but quickly set the matter aside. To Korell the meaning was plainer, but she refused to give Avon the information he was seeking.

Vila made an attempt to get his brain into some sort of working order.

'If you are involved in human technology you can read my mind...'

'That shouldn't take long,' said Avon.

Korell ignored the comments. 'Everyone has certain numbers lodged in the subconscious,' she said to Avon. 'Numbers such as seven four seven three.'

'Seven four seven three?' repeated Vila. It seemed meaningless.

'It was the number of the apartment that Anna and I shared,' admitted Avon simply. He showed no emotion but inside was annoyed with himself. He knew he had not told Korell about that number. How had she found it,

without access to Orac? And more importantly how had he, Avon, been so utterly stupid as to overlook the connection? Korell, he realised, was going to be an enemy worthy of him.

‘I can’t debug Orac without Orac and the key,’ said Avon sitting down in the third chair. Vila now found himself between the two protagonists.

‘There you are,’ Korell replied, nodding towards a bulkhead in front of the freighter’s own master computer complex where the transparent box was placed. A couple of lights shone inside but the machine was silent. ‘All yours.’

Orac, inert, looked like nothing more than a transparent plastic container of crossing wires, control panels and tarriel cells. It measured about two feet across by one foot wide, and was light enough for a man to carry by the handles at either end. Vila had often described it as nothing more than a pile of old junk and at this moment it looked like it.

Avon moved across the deck and began working carefully, his face taut. The slight frown on his forehead was barely distinguishable, and yet despite his growing nutrient and soma haze Vila saw Avon was seriously troubled. Avon was never an all action fighter – he knew perfectly well when his own best interests were served by doing nothing, or even at times running away. But here he seemed to be showing real signs of puzzlement – possibly even defeat. The old look of a man who, even if he didn’t have all the answers knew that no one else would work them out faster than he could, had gone. And that was odd, because no matter what sort of fix Avon was in he would always believe that his inherent abilities would get him out.

‘Er...’ Vila was unsure what to say. ‘Er’ seemed a fair start.

‘Shut up,’ came the reply. That at least was the Avon of old. Vila shut up. Avon continued to work methodically. After ten minutes a gentle hum could be heard – after twelve Orac’s rotating lights came back to life, and on fifteen minutes a familiar, irritated, impatient voice returned.

‘What is it now?’ the computer demanded.

‘You are needed,’ Avon replied.

‘Will Orac respond to my commands?’ asked Korell.

‘Why shouldn’t it?’

‘Because he has a will of his own.’

‘You are well informed, but *he is it*. Orac is a machine.’

‘Will Orac respond to me as much as to you?’ Korell persisted. ‘Tell me if there are programmes you have implanted in the machine that will hinder my use of it.’

‘There are no programmes. It all depends on Orac. Why don’t you ask?’ Avon’s voice was clipped.

‘Because if it is not telling me the truth then it probably will not answer that question honestly either.’

‘So now you just have to trust me – and Orac. But you knew that all the time anyway. When Ensor made Orac he programmed it with his own personality and thirst for obscure knowledge – the sort of knowledge that Ensor never really had time to develop until he settled on Aristo, and by then he was getting old. Requests for information from us tend to get in the way of Orac’s studies.’

Korell turned to the machine. ‘We are on board a Mode 12 Freighter Transporter. It has a low grade Fusion Drive capable of time distort 4 only. It has no teleport facilities...’

‘I know all that,’ interrupted Orac. ‘Kindly state your business and allow me to get back to more pressing matters.’ Avon allowed himself a slight smile, but Korell’s incessant calm was unruffled.

‘Orac, I wish to transform this craft into a deep space cruiser capable of at least time distort 12 and preferably time distort 16; with a teleport facility which can operate over two thousand spacial. I want defence mechanisms capable of withstanding plasma attack. You know what facilities are on the base outside. We can use all those. Physically there are just the three of us

plus the four service robots in the Plantation Centre. We also have access to two flyers grounded on the far side of the Centre. Is it feasible?’

Orac answered at once, ‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you will need a supply of sygnum crystals for the plasma shield, and a small number of radiation direction finders for the teleport which you do not have on the base and cannot build with the various raw materials which you have at your disposal. And there is one further problem.’

‘Yes?’ Korell showed no disappointment. It was as if she had expected the answer.

‘Even if you had those materials it would still take the three of you half way into the third century of the New Calender to build the equipment. You would all be dead – although when that joyous time comes I will at least be allowed to proceed with my enquiries in peace.’

Korell was not to be put off. ‘We need these modifications to this, or another suitable craft, within three weeks. Is there a strategy that we could follow?’

‘Yes, but it would be highly hazardous.’

Vila groaned and sank further into his chair. The others ignored him.

‘By using some of the parts on the base you can, under my guidance, modify the base androids to work on this craft and give it time distort facility to the level you require. However, to obtain the other parts for the rest of your modifications you will have to travel to a deep space repair port and procure certain items. The nearest port is a space station in orbit around the planet Ferron in the third sector.’

‘But once we reach the Ferron station we shall have to remove the parts we need without the use of teleport, and travel without plasma protection.’

‘That is logically correct, and barely worth stating, if I may say so.’

‘That’s right Orac, you tell them,’ said Vila from his corner.

Avon removed the switch from Orac and turned to Korell. 'Satisfied?' he demanded.

'Perfectly. Now if you'll be kind enough to get Orac to tell us exactly what we need, Vila and I will go and work with the androids. Vila – work.'

'All my life,' sighed Vila, 'there has been work. I keep telling people that stealing is better, but still they want work.'

'This work is theft,' said Korell patiently, as she led the reluctant thief out. 'Avon, collect the initial instructions and then come to G9 corridor. Vila will open up the androids so you can reprogramme them.'

Avon nodded. Immediately he heard the main door close behind them he turned to Orac and reinserted the key. 'What is your problem?' he asked the machine.

'To what do you refer?' replied Orac, with the superior air he had inherited from his creator.

'Skip the games Orac, I don't have time,' Avon told him. 'Is it MIND?'

'Machine Induced Neural Deviance is a concept, and cannot be logically used in relation to the question "What is your problem?" Besides, MIND is a theoretical construct of unproven base. No one has demonstrated that it is possible to make individuals deviate from their normal course of actions through machine codes. Apart, that is, from the crudest call signs which induce individuals to return to particular locations, and those require pre-programming. Indeed...'

To interrupt the seemingly endless flow Avon removed the key with a flourish of his right hand. He paused for a moment and then reinserted the key. 'Let's try again, Orac. You are suffering some sort of interference. Could that interference be MIND?'

Orac was not to be so easily deflected. 'Since I do not recognise that Machine Induced Neural Deviance exists, the answer must logically be no. But there is another machine – it appears to be unreadable by me. I have

endeavoured to establish contact on a number of occasions but without success.'

'Is it a computational device?'

'That is as it appears, and yet if it were a computer then it would be readable by myself. Therefore, since I cannot read it, it logically cannot be an instrument of computation.'

'What function does it perform?'

'I do not have that information.'

'Where is it situated?'

'I do not have that information, although it appears to be close by. Now if you will allow me to continue with my work there are many problems relating to this part of the galaxy which need investigation.'

'Forget that Orac. I want to know about the mechanism you cannot read. I want to know where it is, what it is and who, if anyone, controls it. And I want to know if it could just conceivably be the first example of Machine Induced Neural Deviance that you have come across.'

'That of course was one of the matters to which I was referring,' Orac announced. 'You knew as soon as you initiated the reprogramming that there was a central logical problem facing me.'

'Therefore,' interrupted Avon, 'get on and solve it.'

But Orac was not to be told what to do. 'Therefore,' the machine replied, emphasising the word, 'do not instruct me to undertake tasks which you know perfectly well I am already investigating: It is a prime example of the way in which DNA based organic life forms waste the time of entities such as myself. Really Avon, your mind must have degenerated during your spell in the dome. And I did have hopes for you! You should devote yourself to a course in logical training – the educational section of the dome computers should be able to provide suitable material.'

'Thank you Orac, I'll bear your advice in mind. But before you get back to your esoteric studies we'll need the details of how to get this ship to

travel through space.'

'First, improve the ship's computer so that it will take rapid information from me. That will liberate me from the task of having to listen to you, Avon. Enlarge the memory function in Gate 19 and introduce a voice synthesiser – you should be able to design it. Then we should get what we want.'

Inside the plantation dome Vila pondered the prone form of one of the service androids. The machine was box like running on eight wheels with ten separate highly extendable arms located around the edges. Its white shiny surface contained a number of contact points just below a central brain section located in the top of the box. Vila had succeeded in bypassing the primary feeds which acted as a locking mechanism to the robot's brain. What he couldn't do, and indeed wasn't expected to do by either Korell or Avon, was start to reprogramme the machine to accept his orders. On the other hand Vila fancied a tame android for himself. The simple fact of lack of knowledge had never stopped him in the past, and seemed unlikely to now. He lowered a lance into the brain and nearly dropped when a voice spoke quietly from behind.

'One inch lower and the back up circuits will discharge through you.'

Vila didn't need to be told twice. He leapt backwards and collapsed onto the floor.

'Where is Korell?' asked Avon, whose voice it was.

'Somewhere through there.' Vila indicated with a vague wave of the hand to the rest of the dome. 'I have instructions to open up the brains of these mobile boxes for you to do your reprogramming bit. Just make sure they respond to the orders of all three of us. Korell specifically included me.'

Avon knelt down and inspected the android. It looked a straight forward job. He turned to Vila. 'Go back to the ship and open up every locked

compartment you can find. Check inside for anything other than the on board control systems that might be computer based. Also open up the safety locks on all the on board computers so I can get inside them.'

'Wonderful,' said Vila, not moving. 'You're going to disable the ship we are leaving in so that it runs out of control with all of us on board. A brilliant scheme. I should have thought of it myself.'

'If that *was* the scheme you would have thought of it yourself.'

'Listen, if you want to commit suicide that's fine, but don't involve me. Hasn't it struck you that Korell is getting us off this soaking planet? She hasn't attacked us, killed us, threatened us, or anything us. In fact I don't see how she could threaten us even if she wanted to. So what are you doing fooling around with the ship's gear?'

Avon decided to humour the thief. He spoke rapidly in a low voice. 'Vila, five months ago this area was crawling with Federation troops, now it isn't. A number of people, or possibly their bodies which were here, are no longer here. Somewhere close by there is a computer that Orac cannot read. The only person who conceivably knows what is going on is Korell. Since she is unlikely to tell us the answers I want to know where the other computer is and what it is. If things go wrong Orac is our only friend, and I don't want Orac being intercepted by something we know nothing about. There is a fair chance that whatever it is that Orac cannot read is on the ship, so our job – correction your job – is to find it.'

Vila got up resignedly. 'All right, Avon. Yes, Avon. I'm going Avon, at once Avon:' He repeated the phrases over and over as he made his way back to the entry hatch. His intention was to go outside, sit down and do none of the things Avon had asked of him. But it was raining again, so he ran quickly into the ship to get dry. Finding himself on-board and alone, he turned back to the one thing he could do – the one thing that made him Vila – and started opening the locked doors.

Servalan looked up from her high backed chair. The office was simple, stark, monotone. The screen and the touch sensitive plate next to the vidfone were the only items on the desk. Her hair, as ever, was short and jet black. Her clothes, on the other hand were elaborate but still not colourful. The dress reached the floor. The long sleeves nearly covered her hands. Her shoes were totally impractical for movement, yet somehow she managed without any sign of difficulty or discomfort.

She looked up at her guest and smiled a sweet smile revealing, to those who knew her, more malice than friendship. ‘You were on the planet Captain Telon?’ she asked carefully.

The officer of the crack Federation surveillance squad, LD9, stood squarely to attention. ‘Yes Commissioner.’ His helmet and face mask were held correctly in his right hand, his left arm straight to his side. His feet were a regulation twelve inches apart. His black uniform had one flash of colour – the Federation globe positioned just over his heart.

‘What were your orders there?’

‘To remove the prisoners held in the compound and return them to Earth.’

‘To Earth?’ Servalan moved her mouth to produce a slightly quizzical look. Her head tilted to one side. The smile changed slightly and became momentarily more encouraging. ‘They must have captured someone important for those degenerates in the Administration to stir themselves.’

‘Commissioner...’ The Captain hesitated, unsure of his superior officer’s security clearance. This could be a test of his efficiency. He allowed himself a swift intake of breath and then decided to push on. ‘For some time the planet had been used by enemies of our Federation. We have had them under close surveillance and had infiltrated their command structure. Our enemies were planning a rebellion and were trying to attract other dissident elements to their base. All of the rebels were to be rounded up.’

‘Rebels.’ Servalan sneered at the word. She placed her hands firmly on her desk and stood up, brushing past the captain as she swept across her office. ‘Who were these great outlaws that senior officers of the Federation had to rush half way across the Galaxy in order to have them arrested?’

‘One was the rebel leader Blake, Commissioner.’

The sneer froze on Servalan’s face. For a moment she did not speak, she did not move. She barely breathed as she turned to the captain. ‘Did you see Blake?’

‘Yes, Commissioner. I supervised the identification of his body. He was dead. Shot repeatedly from very close range.’

‘You are sure it was Blake?’

‘Yes, Commissioner. He is one of the main criminals wanted by our Federation. We have his picture...’

‘Don’t tell me about Blake, you fool.’ Servalan snapped. ‘I know more about him than you’ll ever know. What about the others?’

‘We found a number of bodies, and signs that other people had been injured and had left the area. We were about to start our round-up and identification, according to orders, when we were attacked.’

‘By whom?’

‘Madam, we have no idea. The attack was sudden and came from outside the compound. We evacuated the dome to avoid being caught by Aoline 97 – it is a standard precaution, the new gas can maim instantly... By retreating through the compound we were able to avoid the attackers and leave

without loss beyond those involved in the shooting of Blake, of whom four were seriously injured.'

Servalan stopped her pacing and turned to the captain. Correctly he had remained facing the Commissioner's desk even though she were no longer seated there. 'You mean you evacuated without even seeing your opponents?'

'Yes, Commissioner. Our instrumentation clearly showed overwhelming forces attacking us. And because our prime orders were to ensure the final elimination of Blake it was felt we had complied with...'

'And Blake?'

'Madam?' The question seemed incomprehensible. Had Servalan not been listening?

'Blake, you fool, Blake. Where is the body of Blake?'

'I presume still on the planet, Commissioner. As I reported, Madam, we evacuated rapidly, there was no time to return to the domes...'

'So there is no proof, just your word.'

'Madam...'

'You may go Telon.' Servalan's voice was suddenly harsh. There was no room for argument. The officer left.

Servalan continued to pace the room, her fists clenched. Her strides were as long as her full dress would permit. The material made a gentle swishing as it ruffled against the synthetic floor coverings. She had wanted Blake for her own. The rumours of his continued existence had circulated ever since the Galactic war. She knew; she had even cultivated them at times. But a rumour of his death – that would never serve her purpose. Servalan returned to the console at her desk.

'Yes, Commissioner.' It was the voice of a mutoid; the only beings Servalan ever really trusted. Vampire-like, they existed on blood plasma, but were moderately good fighters and totally reliable.

'Bring me a complete analysis of the status of the planet Gauda Prime.'

There was no more conversation. The mutoid, trained to accept the personality of her commander, had long since learned not to waste time with formalities. Instead she instantly called up the information from Data Central, and transferred it into a small plastic-like card. The mutoid – to anyone not knowing how she lived she could have been an attractive young female – took the card to Servalan, and immediately left the room.

Servalan studied the information carefully. She read of the frontier planet's transformation from a peaceful agricultural society into an Open Planet where the normal laws of the Federation were abandoned in order to increase the speed at which natural resources were being exploited. She read the classified appended report that the planet was apparently suspected of being used by criminal elements as a gathering place, and that political motives were suspected. She read of the bounty hunters whose job involved rounding up and killing the criminals who had enjoyed freedom under the now terminated Open Planet policy. She read of the existence of an infiltrated Federation unit ready to take out the rebels. And she read no more. That was all. No Blake. No mention of Avon or Orac. No mention of their spaceship Scorpio with its teleport facilities – probably the only teleport system left in the Galaxy.

A puzzled look passed over Servalan's face. She stared at the blank screen in front of her. Finally she used the vidfone; a second later a picture appeared. The dismissed Captain, back in his quarters, looked somewhat more nervous than he had in Servalan's presence. But irrespective of his feelings he naturally obeyed the Commissioner's command to return.

'Captain,' said Servalan as soon as the door closed behind him, 'you must forgive my abruptness of a moment ago – forged entirely by disappointment. The man Blake – you may have heard of him.' The Captain nodded. 'An arch criminal – and the thought of him dead, and not answering my questions, momentarily flooded my judgement. A weakness on my part – forgive me.'

The Captain was suitably stunned. Not only was it unheard of from a senior Federation Commissioner to ask a captain to accept an apology, for Servalan to do so was beyond belief. He made a sound deep in his throat which could have been a cough, a protestation or an acknowledgement. Servalan seemed to find it acceptable. 'I have been looking at the data on this planet...'

She affected not to remember its name.

'Gauda Prime.' The captain helped her out.

'Of course, Gauda Prime.' She waved a delicate hand imperiously. 'And I can see the problems you faced.' She paused; the captain looked relieved. 'But I also think there is more information that can be found from the planet. I therefore propose an expedition to return there – with you in charge.'

Telon was impressed, and felt duty bound to protest his lack of qualifications for the job. The protestations confirmed Servalan's view of the man. She pressed on with the plan rapidly forming in her brain. 'It will be a highly secret mission, Captain, for if there are forces lurking in that part of the frontier they will certainly pounce on a large fleet and our chances of finding what evidence remains will be lost. We will take just one ship – mine. You will command. If you will make ready...'

The captain was dismissed before further speeches could be made. Servalan sat back in her chair and smiled. From the cabinet below her monitor she took a tumbler full of intoxicating green liquid and sipped gently. The smile on her lips grew.

Avon did not smile. Korell was giving him far too much freedom to plot and plan. As part of his mind worked on that problem the rest of him concentrated on other matters. There was no difficulty getting time alone with Vila – Korell regularly wandered around the Plantation base looking for the items that Orac specified would be needed to build the fusion drive

amendments they needed. But Vila reported that his search had drawn a blank. He had worked his way through every section of the ship and there was nothing that looked remotely like a computer apart from those bits which should be there. The on-board mainframe also looked normal. Once Vila had opened it up Avon inspected it, but could find no sign of tampering.

Avon sat down behind the bank of instruments that made up the main control board which faced the captain's position. He needed more information and he needed it quickly if he were not to be forced into trusting Korell with more than he wanted to give away. The Orac computer was still giving out that subtle distress code he had found on switching the machine back on, and as long as that happened there was a strong chance that this outside force, whatever it was, was up to something not entirely to Avon's benefit. But unless he had some other information soon he was going to have to ask Orac for help, and the danger of that was that if Machine Induced Neural Deviance was at work it could use Orac as a booster to increase its influence. In desperation Avon turned to Vila. The thief had his feet up on the pilot's desk and was trying to flick small pellets of carbon into a waste discharge point on the far side of the control cabin.

'After the shoot out... Tell me again. What happened after you crawled away from the action?'

'You mean what happened after you shot Blake?' Vila was not going to let Avon forget that – ever. He was still completely unsure why Blake had been shot, but whatever the reason it didn't matter. Vila owed much to Blake. Blake had rescued him from the prison planet Cygnus Alpha – before a clever vidcast commentator had thought of calling them "Blake's 7". Vila had heard that the commentator had then found himself transferred to Cygnus Alpha, theoretically to make a documentary on the subject of the criminals deported there. Unlike Blake, he had never made it back.

Blake had gone to Cygnus Alpha to rescue Vila. Blake had been the nearest thing Vila had ever had to a father figure – at least in Vila’s memory. And Avon had shot him.

Avon offered no comment.

Vila shrugged. ‘After I got out I looked for somewhere to shelter. I went into the nearest ship – this one – switched the rear viewers on and watched.’

‘Did you see any guards outside?’

‘Only bodies.’

Avon found it hard to believe. ‘Were they all dead?’

‘I didn’t ask them, but their conversation wasn’t up to much.’

‘What about Tarrant, Dayna, Soolin...’

‘What about Blake?’

Despite the taunt Avon was determined to pursue his line of questioning. ‘Didn’t you see anyone alive – or hear anything?’

‘Hear anything? It was commando country out there. All the bounty hunters – hundreds of them on the communication channels spread out across the planet, armed to the teeth shouting orders at each other.’

‘Then what? Did you see them?’

‘No, after a while they just stopped shouting. It all went silent.’

‘Equipment failure?’

‘No I checked. Avon I know you think I am stupid...’

‘You’ve noticed!’

‘... but I wanted to know what was going on. I checked and double checked. There was nothing else to do.’

Avon thought again. It made little sense. In the distance the night animals were beginning to make themselves heard as sunlight faded. He could see Korell walking back to the ship carrying several crates, followed by two androids equally loaded down. Avon looked at Orac solemnly. He really did need some information.

‘Nothing arrived? No ships – apart from your mysterious sphere?’

‘Nothing. Just one freighter take off, plus the flyers on the far side of the dome. After that it all went quiet.’

The work progressed rapidly. The androids raided the other ships for the items Orac specified, and followed the master computer’s instructions for putting the whole thing together. Avon took control of the delicate control-disk work and general reprogramming of the solid state circuitry and tarriel cell link ups. Vila opened doors and lockers, sometimes overtly because Korell requested it, sometimes covertly because Avon was still seeking the interfering device, and sometimes in the vague hope that he might find something interesting.

Korell continued to run her slack regime. After a week of the preparations Avon could have taken off in what was, by then, a fairly fast ship with Orac to guide the navigation computers, and, if he really wanted him, Vila as a galley hand. But he didn’t leave, and Korell seemed secure in the knowledge that he wouldn’t.

Avon concentrated his mind in a way he had not had to do for some time. For years it seemed his brain had been going rusty. True, once or twice he had had to outwit some clever opponents – people who relied not just on force but on brain skill. But mostly he had faced crude fighters like Servalan. It seemed so long ago that he had had to solve a real problem that was not of his own making. He put his mind into a rigorous routine.

After two weeks Avon finally made his move. The approach was elegant and yet simple. Korell, as a social technologist, worked on a set of assumptions as to what Avon would do and took counter measures accordingly. So Avon instructed Orac to generate long lists of human activities which were possible on Gauda Prime. Avon then numbered them and instructed the ship’s computer to generate random number series. As soon as a number was generated which matched one of Orac’s activities he undertook that action. He went for a walk in the forest in the pouring rain.

He held a long and pointless conversation with Vila on the subject of theft. He asked Orac for guidance on the question of certain obscure mathematical formula long since abandoned in computer logic. He started doing physical exercises but gave them up when he realised he needed them. He built a weather forecasting unit. He measured the daily growth of fifty randomly selected trees. And on the fifth day he carried Vila's kit for him when he went to open a series of doors at Korell's bidding.

'Of course,' Vila announced, 'I respect a person who sees my value. Korell, she has a job, she sees a man who can do it, and off we go. She gets the job well done, and I...'

'That way?' Avon interrupted.

Vila was too deep into his self congratulation to notice he was lost. 'The directions send you down corridor 24 to intersection F4. That,' Avon told him with a wave of the hand, 'is corridor 24.'

Vila accepted the course correction with a grunt and a nod, and returned to his monologue. 'Blake knew my value too. I always got on with Blake. "Blake," I used to say, "give me a door to open and I'll do it. Don't worry about the danger, if I can be of help, then just let me know."' As he rambled on his voice changed subtly. It became more lilting. He spoke with a flowing ease that totally left him when faced with reality. It was that, and his inability to deal with people in real life, that had sent Vila into a life of crime. Vila loved mankind and desperately wanted to be able to cope with it. Avon could cope only too easily, and because of that despised everyone he met.

Avon pulled himself away from his own thoughts and found Vila still rambling. 'Dayna, she knew it too. Always fancied me, Dayna. Of course she never admitted it in public, but deep down inside she saw the value of my talents, my gentlemanly manner...'

'F4,' announced Avon, wondering how much more of this he was going to have to take. He made a mental note to have a word with Orac about

removing all options that involved Vila. Vila stopped and unfolded the plan. Korell had marked a row of lockers along the wall of the corridor as requiring Vila's special skills and he set to work on them at once. Avon passed over the implements needed. There was nothing else to do.

The lockers contained thermal lances, the cores of which were built from a compound of herculanium and radium shielding, obviously helpful in the redesign work the androids were undertaking. Korell's requests were always reasonable.

They started the walk back, both laden with lances. Vila continued his reminiscence. Gan, Jenna, Cally, Soolin, they had, it seemed, all respected him, and recognised his value. The women had secretly admired him. Only when he recalled that they were now all apparently dead did Vila begin to get morose, and wonder if there was some more adreneline still on the base.

Suddenly Avon stopped dead in his tracks his eyes on his left wrist. Vila looked back in amazement and rapidly retraced his last few steps.

'You know I have never taken you for a collector of old junk,' he announced.

'Quiet,' said Avon still looking at his wrist. On it was a teleport bracelet from the ship Avon and Blake had flown together – the *Liberator*. It was useless since the ship had been destroyed two years previously through the recklessness of one of Avon's attempts to find Blake. But it was not as a communicator that the bracelet was attracting Avon's attention. The device also measured radiation, and it was showing a surge at that moment, flashing a dull red where normally it indicated green.

Avon told Vila. 'Then let's move,' the thief replied already several steps down the corridor. 'I've had enough radiation sickness for one lifetime.'

'It's not that sort of radiation,' Avon announced tersely. 'It's a much lower waveband. Open that door.' He was pointing at a standard corridor opening, a sliding door set into the smooth wall. It was painted with the green and brown of a stores room. Vila had opened a whole series of these

already. Most of them contained vacuum attachments and cleaning fluids for the androids. With a touch of the hand plate and the gentle pressure of a by-pass hand probe that Vila kept in his pocket the door slipped sideways.

Inside was the tiny room Vila had expected. It contained a collection of boxes, piles of old junk, remnants of weapons now long since past their use, and decaying spares for laser tubes, and of course, vacuum attachments. There was hardly enough room to actually get inside. Avon checked his bracelet once more. 'In there,' he announced. 'Start moving it Vila.' Knowing that protest was useless Vila began to move items from inside the room out to the corridor. As the junk came out Avon checked it through. It took Vila only ninety seconds to put his foot into a can of cleaning fluid that he knew would be in the room somewhere. Someone had taken a perfectly ordinary store and filled it with rubbish. Vila didn't really want to know why.

'Stop,' shouted Avon, and then carefully lowered his voice. 'What have you just moved?'

Now actually inside the room, Vila was randomly pushing everything he could find through his legs. Gingerly he turned round and looked down. There, just behind him, was what could only be described as a black box. Its shiny surface gave no hint of its operation or its intention. But the location of the handles on either side gave Vila a strange notion of having seen it before.

'Orac?' he questioned aloud. He knew it couldn't be, but it looked just like a miniaturised version.

'No – but built by the same man.'

'But why would Ensor bother with a second version? He already had Orac.'

'Because Ensor was selling Orac to the Federation. When we found Ensor he was dying, and badly needing medical help. That help was part of the deal he set up with the Federation...'

‘... which Servalan intercepted. She was never going to save the old man.’

‘Ensor knew that whoever owned Orac could read all the information passing through computer systems in the Galaxy. All the confidential computer traffic. And Ensor also knew that anything he did after that would be readable by Orac. So he needed another machine.’

‘Another Orac.’

‘No, that would have just led to both machines reading the output of the other without either of them having secrets.’

There was a sound from the doorway behind them. They spun round as Korell joined in the conversation. She was, of course, smiling and relaxed. ‘Ensor died, Blake got Orac and the secret of Ensor’s other computer was lost,’ she said. ‘One to you Avon. I didn’t expect you to find the location – but then I didn’t know about the old communicator bracelet on your wrist.’

‘And I didn’t know about this computer, at least not at first.’

‘But Orac knew,’ Korell went on, ‘because Orac helped Ensor work on the plans of the alternative computer. During the long voyages with Blake and his friends, you must often have felt in need of company, and since the crew were not up to your standard you conversed with Orac.’

‘Ensor must have removed the ability to recognise what it was that was going to be unreadable to Orac. After all, if Ensor expected Orac to be in the hands of the Federation he didn’t want Orac telling people who had just paid him a million credits that Ensor had another machine, even if it wasn’t as powerful as Orac. So Orac believed that Ensor had worked on the alternative but never finished the work. The information would therefore be classified by Orac as useless. So here we have a computer which Orac cannot read. And it cannot read Orac.’

‘Right,’ Korell agreed. ‘That’s why I needed you and Orac. This machine cannot even talk to the computers on this base to find out where everything is stored. It has just been my way of undertaking statistical research without

Orac knowing. And I hate to disappoint you, but it has nothing whatsoever to do with Machine Induced Neural Deviance.'

'What's his name?' asked Vila always practical and anxious to escape any conversation about MIND, which he knew he would never follow.

'Caro,' Avon told him. 'And *he is it.*'

'Does it speak?'

'Of course I can speak,' announced Caro. It was a voice identical to Orac's.

'I don't think I can take two of them,' said Vila.

'You won't have to,' Avon told him. 'Caro has no purpose apart from keeping secrets from Orac.' He looked straight at Korell. There was a deeper meaning to his words that Vila could not grasp.

'Not quite true, Avon,' Korell replied. 'Orac has the unfortunate habit of refusing to undertake some tasks it considers too menial. Caro has Ensor's voice, just like Orac, but not his personality. Orac can pass problems to Caro – it doubles the power.' Korell walked across to the machine and removed a key from the top.

'Avon!' This time the voice came from his wrist. Avon touched the bracelet.

'Yes, Orac?'

'A Federation ship landed in the docking bay next to this ship ten minutes ago.'

'Incredible,' said Vila. 'I could have spotted it earlier looking at the sky.'

'So why didn't Orac tell us?' demanded Avon. He stared hard at Korell.

'Just one of Caro's little extras,' Korell replied unruffled. 'Caro can stop Orac's full functions, without Orac even being aware of it.'

'You thought I'd use Orac to help me leave the planet once we started putting the new ship together?'

Korell smiled and said nothing. Vila meanwhile was getting worried. He had moved out into the corridor, looking for the inevitable attack. For a

moment he darted back into the small room with a hurried appeal for an adjournment of the debate to the other side of the Galaxy.

Avon however refused to move as he took a hard look at Korell. 'You must have known they would come.'

'Believe me, my judgement was that we would be away just before interest was aroused. But I did have to make predictions without Orac. If you want to be convinced that I'm not with the Federation you can wait here and find out. Or we can try for the ship.'

As Avon and Korell remained calm Vila approached panic. In fact he was almost ready to run to the freighter on his own. Only cowardice kept him back.

Avon turned and led the way to the main control room. There instead of making for the main door he switched on the viewing screens on the central panels, resting his hands on the back of the controller's chair momentarily, studying the pictures. Outside, two figures could be seen leaving a small craft which had landed in the clearing on the far side of the stranded freighters. They were hesitantly making their way to the Dome.

'Servalan,' said Avon. 'As you anticipated.' He looked at Korell and glanced down at Caro. 'Is it still switched off?'

Korell indicated that the machine was still inoperative as Avon switched on his communicator. 'Orac, if we take off in the freighter now can we outrun the ship that has just landed?' he asked.

'No,' came the simple reply.

'Then we steal theirs,' suggested Vila.

'Not possible, Vila,' Orac told him. 'The spaceship alongside will only respond to a combination of voice and hand prints used in a pre-designated sequence.'

Vila was hurt. 'I've broken through those before,' he told the computer.

'But never in less than four hours, and I suggest that you will not have four hours alone on that ship.'

‘All right plastic face. What do you suggest?’

‘Surrender.’

‘That’s brilliant. The best computer in the Galaxy and he tells us to give up.’

But Orac was persistent. ‘Servalan is unsure of what is going on here, and she is obviously not here officially. Otherwise she would bring a full fleet with her, not just one craft. I picked up no computer talk between other ships of her fleet. With her uncertainty, she is likely to keep you on the planet until she works out what has happened and how she can profit by it. I would suggest that in another two days we shall be able to outrun Servalan’s ship. You, Avon, and you Korell, can certainly keep Servalan talking for two days. Vila, I suggest you tell her everything at once. Your lies are at the best of times implausible and Servalan may quickly get bored.’

And with that Orac shut down, as the main door of the Plantation dome opened to reveal the woman that Avon knew he must one day kill.

Orac's analysis of Vila was by and large correct. There were in fact a number of aspects of social life which Vila found slightly beyond him. Not that he was prone to admit his shortcomings in public; but during moments of stress he would reflect upon the sad nature of a universe that kept throwing him into situations that he really found distasteful and, by and large, impossible to deal with. Sitting in a control room with a variety of weapons pointed at him by unmoving mutoids, whilst undergoing questioning from the one-time President of the Federation, did not help his problem.

Vila knew with a distressing certainty that Servalan had started the questioning with him because he was the one most likely to blurt out the truth. She had not threatened him. She had shown no anger, nor had she even suggested she was in a hurry. But then the questioning had only been going on for ten minutes, and after the first fifteen seconds Vila had told most of the truth. At the same time it had not escaped his thoughts that although Orac had given the advice to surrender it had singularly failed to inform Avon how to arrange the escape in two days' time. The galaxy was, he decided, making less sense every day.

Vila kept talking whilst his mind raced away. He told Servalan of the shoot-out he had witnessed in this very room. He told her of his escape outside, and of his return. The only thing he failed to mention was Caro. No one had told him not to mention Caro, but it had seemed like a good idea when he started talking. Now he knew he couldn't hold out much longer.

‘And now,’ Servalan was saying, her voice deep with sarcasm, ‘the final survivors of Blake’s 7, the greatest freedom fighters who have ever taken on the Federation, are going to give in.’ She threw her hands back, and opened her eyes wide in mock admiration. Her gown, as always totally inappropriate for the occasion, ruffled under her chin. The long sleeves accentuated the mockery of her gesture.

Vila gulped and said nothing.

‘Tell me why.’

‘Because we have got nothing more to fight with, and nothing to fight for. And I was already sick of fighting two years ago, anyway.’ Vila began to speak more quickly, turning in his chair to try to keep Servalan in view as she moved around the room. A mutoid came and pushed a laser rifle into, his neck, making contact a few inches above the jugular vein. Vila took the hint and sat still. ‘What more reason do I have to have Servalan? I was never the leader – you know that. It was Blake and Avon; not me...’

‘So at last you have persuaded Avon, and now Avon listens to the advice of Vila?’ Servalan’s sarcasm grew with every word.

‘Yes... No... What does it matter? I give up, Servalan. If you want to know what Avon thinks, go and ask him yourself. If you want me to say something, tell me what you want me to say and I’ll say it. Or I’ll say something else. Whatever you want.’

To his overwhelming relief Servalan raised her right arm elegantly and clicked her fingers. It was a favourite gesture, emphasising the crudity of her power. The mutoid at his neck lowered her gun and walked across the control room to the door. She touched the panel and it slid back, allowing her to move quietly into the corridor and out of Vila’s sight.

‘Just one final thing, Vila, before Avon joins us.’ Vila’s stomach tightened. This was going to be the killer punch. ‘What is Caro?’

Trying to steady himself Vila attempted to speak. A strangled squeak emerged. He tried again. ‘Orac got dented, so Avon built a replacement.

Calls it Caro,' he said.

'So Avon fancies himself as a rival to Ensor as a computer builder now. And I suppose this is what you hope to bargain for your life with, is it? Orac plus an Orac replacement?'

'I've seen worse bargains,' Vila told her. But before Servalan could reply the mutoid reappeared, with Avon and Korell under guard.

To Avon, Servalan was all smiles and apologies. She was sorry she had had to shepherd them away for a few minutes... She hoped that they had been comfortable. Korell kept a straight face. There was no telling if she had ever met Servalan before, or even knew the full extent of her reputation. Avon smiled and waited for Servalan to finish her fun. She came to the point. 'So Blake is dead, and you have decided to give in.'

'Blake has nothing to do with it, Servalan.' He paused and lifted his right hand in characteristic gesture – fingers spaced, forefinger slightly raised. He spoke more slowly. 'I have nowhere left to run.'

'And what do you expect me to do with you? Shall we share an empire? Shall we be lovers? Shall I have you killed where you stand?' She spread her hands wide, enjoying the moment.

'Oh, you will treat me carefully, Servalan. You need something that I have got.'

'And what, may I ask, is that?'

'Information and knowledge.'

'Dangerous things to trade, Avon. Most people get killed for even thinking of the possibility of selling.' She lingered over the word "possibility", allowing it to rise and fall in its own time, a moment of music in the bleakness of her message.

'Most people don't trade the type of information that I have.'

'So tell me.' Again there was that expansive gesture. Again the smile was on her face. Servalan was enjoying this. Even if Avon wasn't grovelling at her feet he was asking for something, and he had never done that before.

‘I worked the *Liberator*, I worked *Scorpio*...’

‘Fascinating, Avon, but spare me the life history. I’m sure it’s all in the files.’

‘All right, Servalan, but without the details I’m not sure you’ll get the point. Orac...’

Servalan grinned and turned away, but the grin was one of pure malice. She planned a diversion. ‘Ah yes, Orac. Vila was telling me all about Orac - and Caro. Weren’t you Vila?’

Before Vila could answer Avon stepped in. ‘You can ask a monkey how to create a clone machine if you like, Servalan, but if you really want to know about Orac you have got only one person left to ask, because all the others are dead. In fact you might say there is starting to be a shortage of computer knowledge in the Federation.’

Avon too had stopped playing. His voice was hard, his fist clenched. He was ready to have his offer taken seriously. For the first time since Orac had suggested surrender, Vila began to see that it could be a viable stand to take. And he realised that Avon would have worked that out too. It gave him a bad sensation in his stomach. He knew that he was useful to Avon as a thief, as a diversion, as an opener of cupboards. But if Avon really was doing a deal with Servalan his usefulness would continue only as long as it took to conclude the contract. Servalan didn’t need thieves. She worked on a grander scale with troops, battleships, mass murder and planetary destruction. Vila looked again at Korell but she continued with her kind smile, giving nothing away.

Servalan, meanwhile, seemed mildly amused. ‘*All* dead?’ she asked innocently. ‘And who are these "all" that could rival the great Avon in computer matters?’

‘Ensor, whom you arranged to kill, and Muller his student, who was killed by his own invention. That just leaves me, Servalan, unless you have someone else up your sleeve.’

Servalan's mood changed yet again. 'I can think of only one name true, but she seems to be temporarily unavailable. You know – I do believe you are fishing, Avon. What could it be that you are after? This gets more interesting by the minute. And Vila tells me you have built a replacement Orac – is that right? You offer yourself and this new machine to trade for your lives? How gallant of you to include Vila in the deal – and this charming young lady...'

'Korell.'

'Ah yes, Korell. And what does Korell do? You are part of the deal?'

'I do believe I am. I make predictions. I'm a social technologist.'

'How fascinating.' Again that favourite word of sarcasm. Again the false musical flavour. 'We normally use computers for that sort of thing.' She turned back to Avon. 'You and I have been enemies too long. Give me Orac and Caro now and I might just leave you on this miserable planet.'

'Orac is very individualist and might not always go along with your requirements. The deal is that I persuade Orac to work for you, and we take Caro. Or you can just take Orac, find it won't do your bidding and then start rebuilding it. And you can rebuild the teleport system too since the last one we had crashed when *Scorpio* landed.' Avon paused and looked Servalan straight in the eyes. 'I'm not planning to use the machine to rival your bid for total power.'

For a moment a shadow of doubt passed through Servalan's mind. The possibility was tempting: Avon could just be offering a deal. But her decision was delayed by the entry of Telon, reporting a completed search. Servalan demanded details.

'On one ship two androids were working under remote guidance, building a number of changes into the central drive mechanism,' the captain answered.

'Where was the control coming from?'

'It is hard to say, Madam, but it appears to be from within here.'

Servalan looked curiously at Avon, expecting an explanation. Avon glanced across at Caro.

‘Just putting in teleport capacity, and defence mechanisms?’ asked Servalan.

‘Something like that.’

‘Well Avon, I think we might have a deal.’

Having spent so long cooped up in it on his own, Vila found it hard to like the freighter. Even if they did escape the clutches of Servalan he could not imagine growing fond of the unnamed ship. There were two small personnel cabins, a captain’s room, one relaxation chamber, the central control suite with its three working positions, and the giant hold below which was separated from the front of the ship by the fusion propulsion system.

It was, of course, in the control room that most of the work was now taking place. Avon and Korell worked with Caro and the androids, modifying the ship to get it through space at over ten thousand times the speed of light. Orac remained silent, working on problems that none knew and indeed none suspected.

Vila’s final job before Servalan’s arrival had been to locate, transport and store on board all the basic materials to hand for the building of the shields and teleport. There would be plenty of time to assemble them once they were in space. And now he had nothing to do but watch and worry. He took up a regular position in the navigator’s chair. Ahead were four main monitors showing the situation round the ship. The seat moved left and right along rails and tilted back, allowing Vila to put his feet up on the inoperative control panels. Either side of him the two androids stood at rest, patiently watching and waiting.

With one and a half days to go before the deadline Vila left the ship, without a word to anyone. If his departure was noticed it was not

commented upon. His return two hours later carrying three boxes raised no greater interest. He resumed his position in front of the monitors, and dozed off to sleep.

He was awoken by the voice of Servalan. The Commissioner had apparently come aboard to witness the last moments of Avon's work. 'One problem,' Avon was saying. 'There's nothing coming through onto the backup systems. Which means the ship will probably fly – but one system failure and the whole lot blows. I have to go and get some more parts from the flyers...'

'Vila can go...'

'And get the wrong parts, get drunk, get lost.'

'Thank you for your confidence Avon,' said Vila, resenting the insult and trying to shake off the hangover he'd gained as a result of just one of his activities during the two hour journey.

'Very well, Avon, but everyone and everything else stays here except one of my mutoids.'

Avon shrugged, and let it happen. Once they had departed Korell made a few minor adjustments to the equipment in the ship whilst Servalan paced up and down, and her captain stayed well out of the way. Every five minutes the mutoid reported in. Only when the signals stopped and the mutoid missed first one and then a second call-in did the pattern change. Servalan recognised a problem and, as always, turned both on her inferiors and her prisoners. She shouted questions at Avon over the communicator, she bawled at her mutoid – but the silence remained. She threatened Vila and hit Korell about the face, but all to no avail. Vila and Korell had no idea what Avon was up to. As Vila pointed out he could be dead, the mutoid could have gone berserk, a wall might have fallen in...

What was quickly recognised was that even if Servalan did not have a fast new anonymous space ship she did have Orac and Caro, which seemed to make up for the disappointment of losing Avon. Her captain was anxious

to go into the base and find Avon, bringing back to his new mistress the glorious prize of the most wanted man in the Galaxy. But Servalan knew both her captain and Avon too well to allow that to happen. If she lost Telon she'd have to rely entirely on the mutoids for the return journey, which was fine except that she was running out of expendable beings.

She took thirty minutes to make her final move, having returned to her own ship with the remaining mutoids, her captain and the two androids, leaving Korell and Vila on the freighter. She thought briefly of killing both where they stood; but recognised that they could act as bait to tempt Avon out, assuming he were not dead. And if he were not dead she wanted him to finish the work on the freighter.

But Avon's return did not come until five hours after Servalan's ship had taken off and gone into close orbit. He had heard Vila calling him constantly, pleading, bleating, almost crying to see the man who had earlier that year sought to kill him. Korell, on the other hand, did not say a word. She realised with Avon that the transmissions from the freighter to the mutoid's transceiver disk would be monitored by Servalan. But Vila's broadcasts gave Avon an extra chance to put the full extent of his plan into operation.

Avon had waited patiently at the edge of the dome for night to fall and for Vila to give up calling. He then made his way back into the freighter where, as expected, he found Korell fully alert on the control deck trying to decipher the work he had been undertaking on the drive system. She responded at once to his finger held to his lips, and watched him curiously as he twice checked the entire room for anything that could be transmitting back to Servalan.

'There's about half a day's work left to get this ship into a condition where it can outrun Servalan,' Avon announced as soon as he was convinced they were not being overheard. 'In a couple of hours get Vila up and get him to start crying into the transceiver again just as before.'

Korell offered little more than a single word of acknowledgement. She asked no questions and retained her smile. Her blue eyes remained cool, her manner calm. She went back to the computer charts of the third quadrant that seemed to hold a special fascination for her.

Vila did not take the developments so calmly. 'She's got Orac, you know,' he announced walking into the control room. 'And the key. And Caro.'

'And she is in stationary orbit waiting to see if you carry on broadcasting on the mutoid channel. If you don't she is liable to come back down and find out why. If you do she is liable to find herself so sickened by the amount of puerile rubbish that comes from what you laughingly call a brain that she'll depart as fast as possible for the far side of the Galaxy.' Avon pointed to the transceiver and turned back to the drive control computer.

'But what about Orac?' demanded Vila unmoving.

'Orac,' explained Avon patiently, 'is now in the hands of Servalan, and is henceforth a luxury we shall have to learn to do without. Besides, there are more important things in the Galaxy than the toys of Ensor.'

'And the toy was beginning to act strangely,' said Korell. 'The surrender proposal never really made sense.'

'Maybe Orac was just getting old,' suggested Vila wistfully. 'Or maybe it just wanted to be left alone. Telling us to surrender was just an easy way of getting Avon off its back.'

'Maybe Avon sees MIND at work yet again,' said Korell.

Avon put down his probe with a heavy sigh and stood up from the crouched position in which he was forced to work. He looked at both Vila and Korell, but had no need to speak. Vila saw the look and turned to the transceiver. As Avon had feared the end result went far over the top, but he gambled that Servalan would by now have a mutoid listening on her behalf, and they, having no emotions themselves, were poor judges of the legitimacy of other people's feelings.

‘Does this freighter have a name?’ asked Vila idly, as he watched the monitors in front of his position.

Avon looked up from the charts he was studying. ‘I imagine it must have. Why, do you wish to have a naming ceremony?’

‘No, it’s just that we are being hailed by a non-Federation cruiser, and before I answer I’d like to know who I should say we are...’

‘We are the space freighter *Revenge*.’

‘*Revenge*. Against whom?’

‘Against Servalan. Against the President. Against Travis. Against the whole Federation. Against Blake. Final, ultimate revenge, that will never be forgotten.’

Vila stared at Avon in total disbelief. ‘Against Blake?’ he said. ‘Revenge against Blake?’

Korell took time to shower, sleep and generally relax before setting into motion the next development of the situation on board the freighter. At some stage, she knew, she was going to have to try to talk with Avon again. In the prison she had had it all too easy. Avon had seemed convinced that something outside his knowledge was influencing events, and he was prepared to wait to find out what it was. He was also intelligent enough to know that escapes made in the face of ignorance stood less than a tenth of the chance of success of escapes effected on the basis of knowledge. Now things had changed. Avon felt he knew more about what was going on. Clearly he believed, despite Orac’s protestations, that machine-induced

neural deviance existed in some form or other, and it was that belief that was driving him.

But what else did he know and, more importantly, what did he think he knew? Korell herself did, of course, know much more about Avon than possibly any other person in the Galaxy. (Or, she told herself wryly, she thought she did.) But Avon's overriding ability not to communicate, and worse still his ability to communicate irrelevant and misleading bits of information, was something she had not fully bargained for when she had first adopted the role of Avon's jailer. What in the Universe could possess someone as firmly based in his own personal reality as Avon to start believing in a vague half-legend like MIND?

She put on the flaming scarlet uniform of some unidentified non-Federation planet and buttoned it up to the neck. Her white boots came up to her calves. Dressed, she marched back into the control room.

'Where are we going?' she asked, taking her seat.

Vila looked up. He had become so used to Avon taking off across the galaxy without a word of explanation, that he was mildly surprised that anyone should even bother to ask.

Avon did not look up. Unlike Korell he had not taken time off to rest, but had instead dedicated himself to continuing the work with *Revenge's* navigational computers studying charts, asking occasional questions, and watching intently as data was presented onto the monitor in front of the captain's position which he had taken as his own.

Finding herself ignored Korell repeated the question.

'Don't you know?' came the sarcastic reply. 'I thought data prediction was your speciality.'

Korell smiled a smile that would have had Vila grovelling at her feet if there had been room enough in between her chair and the control panels.

'Then let's say,' she replied, 'that I am just testing out a theory.'

Avon stood up and stretched his back. He had found himself a plain all black outfit which (as with Korell's clothes) contained no frills, nothing to reveal to an outsider who or what he was – in marked contrast to Servalan. There was dirt on one sleeve gathered during part of his work inside a microscopic cubby-hole where the quark links on the computer systems controlling the *Revenge* were situated. He hadn't bothered to change since.

'You tell me your theory and I'll give you marks out of ten for guesswork.'

'Not for guesswork, Avon. Remember I knew Anna's apartment number.'

'One success does not make you a genius at prediction, nor does it make you a welcome guest on this ship.'

'I may not be welcome Avon, but I am essential, as you will see.'

'Why don't you prove it to me?'

'We're going to Skat.'

'Very good,' admitted Avon. 'And will you tell your audience how you worked that out?'

'Or even better,' suggested Vila, 'tell me where and what Skat is.'

Korell turned to Vila to answer his question first. 'Skat is a low-gravity isolated planet circling the star of the same name in the fifth sector, rich in sygnium. This ship is lacking in two things: shielding against plasma bolts and teleport. When we can be hit at any time by any moderately well-armed Federation ship, teleport would seem a luxurious extravagance.'

'But Orac told us that we needed to go to Ferron in the third sector.'

'Which is exactly where Servalan would expect us to go. So instead of going to Ferron and using your talents to steal the sygnium we go to Skat.'

The thought struck Vila that the change of plan could just mean he would avoid risking his neck in another madcap theft on behalf of Avon. 'I presume that Skat contains the stuff we need in abundance – I mean we're not going to walk into several thousands of the President's troops or anything like that?'

A broad grin crossed Avon's face, and he moved across and put his arm around Vila's shoulders. 'Vila, I promise you that on Skat there are no guards and sygnum is lying about on the ground free for anyone to take.'

'Good... I think,' said Vila. He frowned and looked at Korell for help, but found none. 'So what's the catch? I mean if the stuff is there and it's valuable enough for us to travel across the galaxy without plasma protection, why doesn't everyone go after it?'

'That is something we have to find out when we get there.'

'And we can't ask Orac because Servalan has Orac.'

'Vila,' said Avon walking back to his position and retaining his smile, 'your grasp on contemporary events is improving. In a few hundred years you'll be up to the level of dunce.' And with that he returned to his analysis.

Korell kept a closer eye on Vila than Avon seemed inclined to. Since take-off Vila had been deeply involved in his three boxes. The contents of the largest had been predictable – alcohol, adrenalin, soma, and para-hyrene – a thick black drink that removed reality in seconds and replaced it with a set of alternatives that could be wonderful or tragic depending on the recipient's mood. It was rare, not because it was difficult to synthesise nor because the base ingredients were hard to obtain, but because it was neither habit-forming nor addictive. As such it had no use for Federation commissioners like Servalan.

But if the first box contained what Korell had anticipated the other two had taken her by surprise. One contained a tiny computer, whilst the other was made up of medical supplies. She was willing to accept that Vila had happened upon the supplies and brought them back expecting Avon's schemes to end in damage to Vila. But knowing that however good a thief he was he was certainly not a computer expert, Korell passed several minutes watching Vila's actions with the boxes. Eventually she worked out what he was up to, smiled and simultaneously rebuked herself for taking

quite so long to see the obvious. With that solved she turned away and put her mind back to Avon and the problem of Skat.

The approach to Skat proved uneventful. Avon worked with the computers and charts, Korell worked on her logical analyses and Vila played with his boxes. Never known as one to indulge in much future planning, Vila had learned over the years that interstellar travel could be infinitely tedious – even with time distort facility in an Avon-modified craft. At best nothing would happen. At worst they would meet aliens, Federation troops, Servalan...

To Vila the boxes were his insurance. During his days on Earth insurance had been an in-word among the thieves with whom he associated. You had insurance against the door you were opening exploding in your face – you used a young apprentice to prime the final sequence. You had insurance against getting caught – you put away enough credits to bribe the first line official who would draw up the charges. You even had insurance against being deported to Cygnus Alpha. But Vila had never been much good at setting up insurance. That was why he had been such a good thief. He had done it all himself. Not through bravery, but through a genuine interest in solving the problems he found himself up against. He liked his work.

Now, however, he had turned to insurance. The medical kit was insurance. So was the para-hyrene. Dangerous stuff, but sometimes any reality was better than the nightmare worlds Avon took them to. And the little computer was insurance. When he had first found it on Gauda Prime Vila had had no idea what it was. The box was little more than six inches square and most of the top surface was taken up with a brown, slightly sunken contact point. The rest of the top surface contained a speaker box, and nothing more. There were no controls, no dials, no touch contacts, just a series of green and red stripes. Fascinated, and with time to pass on the planet whilst the androids did their work, Vila had touched the box, spoken to it, prodded it and finally, bored, tried to open it. Turning to his hip flask

he had then taken a sip of blue wine, but at that very moment an android had sneaked up behind him and announced its presence. Vila had jumped and spilt some of the precious liquid on the box.

‘Auriga wine dated 117 or 118 from Mu Eta. Rating minus three.’ It was a voice from the box. Vila was so surprised he not only dropped it but also dropped his flask. More wine fell onto the box. ‘Auriga wine date 117 or 118 from Mu Eta. Rating minus four.’

Vila objected. He had a feeling his taste was being criticised. ‘It was minus three a second ago,’ he said.

‘Sir, there’s a limit to how much Auriga I can take,’ came the reply. The voice was deep with a well-rounded quality which combined a mischievous humour with a degree of pride.

‘What are you?’ asked Vila.

‘Kinesthetic Analysis and Transmission, Sir.’

‘Eh?’ Long words could have the effect of reducing Vila to the shortest syllables he knew.

The voice repeated itself, and then added helpfully, ‘KAT, Sir, if you prefer.’ There was a pause as Vila looked at the little machine uncertainly. KAT tried to help out. ‘Sir, if you have anything which requires analysis I can perform that humble task.’ The words were spoken in a slow drawn out way that gave the effect of powerful reserves of knowledge, and seemed to add to the little machine’s status.

‘That’s what you just did with the wine?’

‘Wine? Wine?’ KAT seemed affronted. ‘Quark oil Sir! Do not demean the name of that holiest of liquids. No wine was ever produced from that mud heap called Auriga! Now, Sir, if you would care to try some real wine...’

Vila was all attention and edged closer. ‘But no – after that vile liquid what would you taste? No my friend, no! Your taste buds are doomed for ever. For you, Sir, life ahead must revolve around cell acid and sluice mud.’

‘No no,’ Vila protested. ‘You misunderstand. This is the first time I’ve had this wine. I can still taste the better things of life. I know a good wine.’

‘Such as?’ With just two words KAT managed to make a dramatic point, using the sounds where a human might have gestured with arms and hands. The second word rose, adding to the withering criticism KAT seemed to find necessary to pour upon any being found in possession of an inferior intoxicant.

Vila was suitably nonplussed. He hesitated, started speaking, stopped, was about to take a drink from the flask, thought better of it and tried to concentrate.

‘Mirphak.’

‘What?’ KAT seemed disinclined to believe what it had heard.

‘Mirphak,’ Vila repeated sticking to his point. ‘Mirphak mead.’

‘Well... What year?’

‘130, 140 they were all good around then.’

A change came over the little machine’s deep voice. ‘Sir, I see now you are a man of taste and discernment forced temporarily on hard times. If I can be of any assistance.’

Vila looked at KAT and a broad grin passed over his face. ‘Can you seek out substances?’ he asked.

‘Liquid, solid, gas, Sir, whatever you require I can tell you its nearest location.’

‘Fine fine.’ Vila looked around almost afraid that he would suddenly be discovered and KAT taken from him. ‘Just find me the best wines on this base.’

And KAT had done just that, leading Vila into storage areas picking up not only wine but also adrenalin, soma and, inevitably, since it was to be found on Gauda Prime, para-hyrene.

On *Revenge* Vila delighted in giving tiny drops of varying substances of quality to his new found companion. One unlooked for facet of KAT turned

out to be its abilities to offer subtle advice on the delicate question of the making of cocktails. It kept Vila happy for every hour he was off duty, and gave him something to look forward to during the boring hours in the control room.

Skat, from two thousand spacial, looked unimpressive. There were no signs of civilisation, no pools of deadly radiation, little foliage, a spot of wildlife in the oceans, and that was about it. Only the highly sophisticated satellite in geo-stationary orbit, at just over 1500 spacial, struck an ambiguous note.

The master computer on board *Revenge* took the ship towards the object as slowly as the crude controls on board the ship would allow.

Korell, returning to the bridge as fresh as ever, found the need to reveal another of her talents. 'You need to go in on manual,' she said.

'Very true,' Avon told her. 'But I am not a pilot, unless perhaps you are suggesting Vila...'

'Come back Tarrant all is forgiven,' said Vila irreverently.

'He may well do that,' Avon told him mysteriously. 'But in the meantime we do not have anyone among our crew of three who has spent the six years at a Federation Academy, which is the normal pre-requisite for this sort of work.'

'Let me try,' said Korell.

'Don't tell me,' said Vila. 'In addition to five years spent training in logical psychology and sociology, plus three years at the Institute of Human Technology and Behavioural Control, you also trained as a pilot in your spare time.'

Korell said nothing.

'Not talking any more?' asked Vila.

'You asked me not to tell you.'

Korell moved to the pilot's position. 'Disengage the flight computer, Avon,' she said calmly.

Reality once more tormented Vila. He started to plead the case of the navigational instrumentation. For the briefest moment Avon looked uncertain. Everything about the girl had been a surprise so far. Why not an unrevealed ability to fly a space freighter? He needed help: the memory banks of *Revenge* lacked anything that could remotely be called up-to-date knowledge of the star system, and without that the computers would do little more than assume all was normal. He shrugged and pressed two contacts.

'The ship is yours,' he told Korell. 'If we are going to crash, let me know first. I might just have time to hand back to the flight computer.'

'And after you've told Avon,' said Vila, 'tell me too. I might just have time to get drunk.'

Korell nursed the primitive controls in the same calm and gentle way that she undertook every task. A slight smile played across her face. Once she passed a hand through her long fair hair, pushing it back. Once she coughed slightly and even found time to cover her mouth with both hands and apologise to the rest of the crew. Vila, his face drenched in sweat, heard neither the cough nor the comment.

Cautiously the old ship made its way to the orbiting satellite. As they approached Avon kept all short range scanners on the object, whilst Vila watched the long range monitors for any sign of hostile action. Both men reported blanks.

At one spacial Korell brought the ship into a position where it was motionless in relation to the satellite. Avon turned to the ship's ID log, matching the view through the scanners with everything in the memory disks.

'It's old,' she said after a few moments' concentration. 'Very old. About five hundred years. And no sign of functioning. According to the log it was

used as a sort of unmanned communications device, beaming information received from one part of the surface to other locations.'

'Before the tarrial cell came along with its instant communication this type of thing was quite common,' Korell added.

'Historian too?' commented Vila, moving out of his seat and taking a drink from a supply he had stashed under the rear view screen placed behind the three control positions. He didn't even bother to ask KAT's advice, but drank straight from the bottle. Korell ignored his taunt. Vila put the bottle down, resumed his seat and put his feet up on the controls. 'Shall we shoot it down just in case?' he asked.

'Don't you think that might be a little premature?' asked Korell, as always taking every comment seriously. 'For all we know there might be some remnants of that civilisation down there, and the sudden shooting-down of the last artefact of their past might be considered a little hostile?'

Avon returned to more practical matters. 'Do you want to pilot this thing down or shall we make a dramatic breakthrough in the use of pure logic as a controlling force?' he asked sternly.

'With the computers you'd probably get down safely, but we'd follow the most obvious path, which any Skat instrumentation that exists could predict. With me you'll also get down predictably, but with a less obvious course. We might even get up as well.'

Korell's descent started off as well as she predicted, with a few bumps through the atmosphere. As the surface rushed towards them Avon kept close watch on the screens for any sign of electronic activity that would give away the presence of civilisation – a society civilised enough to attack *Revenge* with something more than rocks, arrows and boiling oil. He found nothing and neither did the ship's computers. Indeed all data screens were still registering blank when the attack began. Vila spotted it first on the rear monitors. An array of plasma bolts aiming straight at them from behind.

'Put up the shields,' shouted Avon as Vila announced the news.

‘That’s the whole point,’ called back Vila. ‘They aren’t showing on the screens, only on the rear visuals.’

‘Put up the shields.’

‘That’s still no good. Even if the computers could see them we couldn’t do anything. We can’t withstand plasma attacks. That’s why we’re here — remember?’

‘Then check for computer malfunction, Vila, unless you propose to defend the ship by the force of your argument that we are irreparably doomed.’

Vila performed the checks rapidly. The computers checked out normal. He told Avon.

‘Then put up the shields anyway. They may not be using plasma bolts, Vila, they may just look like them. There’s nothing to lose by putting up the shields. Korell – change course, get us up – and on the far side of that satellite.’

Korell worked hard at the controls. As the ship picked up speed the roar of the fusion engines could be heard on the flight deck. ‘I thought this place was uninhabited,’ she called above the din.

‘And I thought you were designing a course that computers couldn’t predict,’ called back Avon.

‘Bolts still running,’ shouted Vila, petrified.

‘Sir.’ A new voice entered the control room. It was calm and clear, lacking in the urgency of the speech of Vila, Avon and Korell, but nonetheless it was a sound that demanded attention. It was a voice that found no need of shouting even with the ramjets operating at full pressure. Only Avon kept his attention on the job in hand. Despite herself Korell looked at Vila, and Vila looked at the source of the word.

‘Sir. May I have a little drink to steady the nerves? A little Beta Procyon 99 perhaps. The merest drop would suffice...’

Vila looked at KAT in amazement. Of all the times to ask. And yet the Beta Procyon 99 did have a certain soothing tendency. Perhaps a little drop...

‘Have you got those screens up?’ It was Avon who brought Vila back to the present.

‘Yes but they’re draining power.’

‘Keep them up. Korell, are we gaining on them?’

‘No, yes...’

‘Make up your mind.’

‘That is difficult when most of the ship believes they are not there at all. Those things only exist on one set of screens and the computers deny any existence of them at all. But for what it’s worth their distance remains the same. When Vila called they appeared to be at 1200 spacial. They’re still at 1200 spacial.’

Avon decided to act rapidly. ‘Vila, take the shields down. Divert the power back to the main drive. Let’s try and outrun them.’

‘Shields down.’

‘They’re gaining on us. They’re almost on top...’

‘Sir, about that drink. There is a container of Beta Procyon 99 in the recess eighteen inches behind your position. Perhaps now might be the time to consider...’

A sudden vibration shook the ship and the three crew members found themselves hard pushed to stay in their seats. Avon was the first to pull himself back to his position.

‘Damage report.’

Vila checked. ‘None.’

‘None? There must be. We were hit.’

‘No, we felt like we were hit,’ corrected Korell. ‘But we weren’t.’

‘Where are those bolts?’

‘Gone. They must have exploded all around us.’

‘But they couldn’t have. There’s no way they could have made up 1200 spacial in five seconds.’

‘Unless they were waiting for the shields to go down.’

‘But then why miss us? If they have that sort of technology, plus the ability to make up a 1200 deficit when we were moving at time distort 8 they are certainly going to have the capability to hit us.’

‘Are we clear?’ The question came from KAT. Korell checked.

‘We are, and we’re on the opposite side of the planet from the satellite, except...’

‘Except,’ said Vila, checking his controls, ‘the satellite is sitting right on our doorstep.’

‘Then we’re on the wrong side,’ suggested Avon caustically.

Korell stayed calm. ‘Right side, right position. There are now two satellites where there was only one before.’

Avon pounded his fists. ‘Let’s go right out of this system. Ten thousand spacial. And then dead stop.’

At dead stop, they sat in silence. After five minutes Vila went to get the drink that both he and KAT fancied. After an hour he went out to get some food. When he returned he found Korell and Avon still at their positions.

‘You must have worked out where the next source of sygnum is by now,’ he said as he took up his place once more.

‘It is three sectors away and we are not going there,’ Avon told him simply.

‘So where are we going?’

‘Skat,’ said Avon, jabbing a finger at the speck of light on the screen.

‘Even you can’t be that crazy,’ said Vila. ‘We’ve got no plasma protection. Now I know you don’t hold my intellect in the highest regard but I would say that the bunch of people (or whatever they are down there) is probably quite used to strange spacecraft coming to raid their backwater planet for mineral resources. And quite probably by now they have worked

out that the people who raid all have one thing in common. A lack of plasma protection. So they fire plasma bolts.'

'Vila, your powers of logical deduction are superb;' said Korell. Vila grinned broadly. 'Except for one thing.'

The smile vanished as Vila asked uncertainly what it was. 'They missed. All that technology and they missed.'

'Yes I did notice that too,' Vila told her. 'I also notice that I am still alive to argue with Avon. Don't tell me you'll support this idea of going back.'

'It seems logical to me.'

'Logical? That's the craziest form of logic I ever heard. You arrive in an unprotected unarmed ship, you get shot at and then you go back for more.'

'This time,' Avon explained, 'We make it harder for them. We go in without power.'

Korell as the pilot who would have to take them in seemed unmoved, but Vila was nervous. 'How close?' he asked.

'One spacial,' Avon told him, his teeth gritted. 'At that distance we switch on and still have time to make a safe landing.'

'We'll burn up,' Vila said.

'Then you won't have to use the thermal control on your spacesuit too often, will you?' Avon told him uncompromisingly.

'Space suit? Have you seen the space suits these ships carry? Primitive is not the word.'

Avon got up from his position. 'I should seriously consider putting a suit on if I were you, because if you don't you're likely to asphyxiate. We're really turning all the power off. If the things on Skat can read our equipment so well that they can launch an attack at the very moment we turn the shield off, maybe they won't be too clever at spotting a ship burning up in the atmosphere without any power. Let's go.'

'It will be a belly flop,' said Korell.

‘Which means we’ll be side on, on an alien planet, with no chance of taking off again,’ Vila added.

‘We’ll worry about that later,’ said Avon.

The order had been enough for Korell, and she was already climbing into the basic survival suits the ship carried. They were silvery-white, two-piece affairs which offered a minimal amount of possibilities for any movement other than operating the controls. Even walking back across the cabin seemed a mammoth task. Designed only for the direst emergencies, such as depressurisation of the entire ship, they were built so that the wearer could sit tight for days, manoeuvring the ship whilst protected from the cascades of flying debris that accompanied every accident in space. The designs had been superseded thirty years before, but the Federation had never shown the highest regard for the comfort of its freighter crews. Getting the cargo into port in one piece, on the other hand, was always given alpha priority – and that is exactly what the suits allowed.

Climbing into his own suit Vila knew that once again he had lost. What dismayed him most, though, was the apparent support given by Korell. He had been counting on her to act as a restraint upon Avon. Now it seemed he would be permanently outvoted.

As soon as they were all seated Korell tilted the ship gently towards the planet, gave it the slightest nudge with the auxiliary boosters, and let the *Revenge*, now apparently little more than a dead dark hulk, move towards Skat for the second time.

On their slow journey, edged on only by the force of Skat’s weak gravity, and occasional minimal bursts of fusion power, the three sat in darkness. Only the screens were on line, enabling the crew to watch the planet for any possible signs of attack.

It was an hour before they spotted the satellite, and two hours before they passed it. Ten minutes later they started to encounter the atmosphere. With no stabilisers to help them the ship started to be knocked around. At the

same time it started to pick up heat. Vila was the first and in fact only member of the crew to complain. He complained of the heat, the vibration, of feelings of sickness, of gravity drag, of de-orientation, blindness (he had his eyes closed) and a variety of diseases he invented for the occasion. He stopped complaining at twelve spacial as Avon caught sight of the bolts.

‘Damn them,’ he shouted. ‘Korell, let’s move.’

In what seemed to be one move, Korell returned power to the ship, and began the rapid rise back out through the atmosphere.

‘The bolts are gaining on us,’ called Vila.

‘Keep the screens down until they are right there. We need to try and outrun them.’

‘Still gaining,’ called Vila.

‘Five four three...’

‘Screens!’ replied Avon. But his voice was drowned by the noises generated by the vibrations that accompanied the attack and the ramjet howl as Korell took the ship through its paces.

Vila’s comment that whatever it was on Skat was trying to vibrate the crew of *Revenge* to death was ignored. The request by KAT for a drop of adrenalin and soma had a more dramatic effect. Avon turned on the small box with eyes filled with malice. Only the continuing vibration stopped him making it to the analyser. But then suddenly all was quiet. The screens were clear: *Revenge* was once more alone. Avon moved straight to KAT. He picked it up, turned it over and took it across to the main computer, placing it on a plate to the right of the master machine. ‘Analysis print-out,’ he ordered.

The print-out came up on the screen at Avon’s position. He studied it carefully, but eradicated the print-out before Korell had a chance to look across. Vila felt the attention his machine was being given was unnecessary. He spoke rapidly, changing the subject. ‘That’s two attempts on Skat. Is that enough? It’s enough for me. What about you Korell? How do you feel?’

Ready to leave? Time to visit the eighth sector? Other side of the galaxy. No Federation inhabited planets. In fact no planets...'

'They missed twice.'

'Be thankful. Maybe they are just bad shots.'

'As I said last time, not with that sort of sophistication.'

'So what do you want to do? Give them shooting lessons? Maybe we should offer ourselves as target practice.'

Korell tried to broaden the discussion. 'Vila, we can be quite certain that whatever they are firing at us is not plasma. The plasma wouldn't have given us the sort of jolts that we suffered each time. If it is something else, chances are our screens will be able to withstand the attack. And since we know we can't outrun their bolts – whatever they are – we might as well use the screens once the attack starts. The power they take isn't much use to us in any other way.'

'OK, OK, I give in. Avon gets to everyone like this. You should have dealt with him when you had him in prison. You let him talk to you; now he has your brain twisted. It's a disease and contact with Avon means you get it.'

'Except you didn't,' said Avon. 'Presumably because it only affects brains.'

Vila gave up. 'Come on, let's go down there and land. If they miss again we can step outside the ship and wave a flag so they can go on taking pot shots. There's just one thing I ask.'

'What's that?' said Korell with a smile.

'You watch the screens. I'll keep my eyes closed.'

'You were doing that anyway,' said Avon.

Despite his protestations, Vila watched intently this time, and when the attack came shortly after they passed the satellite on their third run in, he was the first to shout.

The third attack was a replica of the previous two. Only this time *Revenge* kept going. At fifteen spacial the Skat ships fired. But there was no bang, no vibration. Five bolts were launched, they ran and stayed at fifteen spacial. Vila reported. Avon watched the controls. Korell flew the ship.

‘Take us down,’ Avon said. There was a slight bump.

‘I just have,’ said Korell.

The ground had approached Vila faster than he would have liked. At one moment the whole ship had seemed to be surrounded by bolts, flare attacks, space liquid and several other forms of death, disease and destruction that he had not even heard of. Even with the expertly soft landing of Korell Vila felt decidedly sick.

Nothing disastrous happened. Korell stayed at the controls, cool, calm, smiling, looking beautiful. In between feeling he was about to throw up Vila wondered how she did it. After a few moments he realised they were down. Avon put the outside view on everyone’s screen. They had landed in what appeared to be a vast green park. Behind them deep tracks dug into the rich grassland where they had slithered to a halt. The neatly mown lawn continued away from them in all directions, broken only by a crazed blaze of colour about half a mile away so bizarre in appearance that it was impossible to take in at one glance. There was a blue brick wall, crumbling, cracked, twisted. It stretched from horizon to horizon, at times reaching up into the misty sky, at times falling to the ground, but never quite disappearing into the grass. Sometimes it was solid and in other places huge holes appeared through which could be seen flashing lights, waving tentacles, peering eyes, distant suns, spreading oceans. At the approaches to the wall the grasslands gave way to something more than grass. Shrubs and bushes rose up and became more animal-like than plant-like. It was as if the

grass was throwing up mutations of itself in an attempt to deal with the wall; as if in its pure form it could not face the wall.

As the crew of *Revenge* looked, the patterns seemed to change. Not just behind and in front of the wall, but in the very wall itself. Parts which had been tall were reduced to rubble. Rubble rose and reached the sky. Holes disappeared and re-formed somewhere else. And all the time in the background there was a murmuring. The sound of all this endless inexplicable activity was no more than a handful of decibels above silence.

Avon tore his eyes away from the screen and touched controls. They all registered a lack of animal life. In fact they registered nothing more than grass. The computers still showed zero readings for electro-magnetic activity, sentient life activity – in fact all activity.

Back on the screens deep lakes had formed in front of the wall and huge lizard-like creatures appeared, only to walk towards the wall and vanish into the ever-changing structure.

‘The air is clean,’ said Korell.

‘I find it hard to believe,’ Vila told her, but she was not to be deterred from making her report.

‘Less than 0.61 gravity, and nothing to worry about, no nasty radiation, healthy sunlight, warm temperature, the grass does not appear to be covered in a plague or virus of any kind, and there seem to be few wild animals. All in all it is safe.’

‘This is insane,’ said Vila. ‘Just look out there.’

‘I tell you what my instruments say.’

‘Then either the screens or the instruments are lying,’ said Avon, rising. ‘And the only way to find out is to go outside and take a look. Unless our eyes are going to play tricks on us too. Get your suit off, get your walking boots on and get outside. Or would you like to stay inside the ship on your own, on watch?’

Vila's natural inclination was to stay in the ship. On the other hand he knew that if the past were anything to go by, contact with Avon and Korell could easily be broken, and he would find himself sitting in a vehicle he couldn't fly watching a wall that broke all the laws of science. At least if he joined the others outside he would not be alone. But on the other hand he would be closer to the wall. He asked if it was safe. He protested about his badly damaged right leg, injured in some now forgotten previous adventure. He complained about the headaches he was getting. But he refused to take up the option of isolation inside *Revenge*.

Just as everyone was ready to move Avon did the unexpected. He picked up KAT and held it in his hands for a moment. He turned the box over several times before finally putting it down on the contact pads set in front of the computer. Nothing happened, except that Avon grinned, put the box in his pocket and turned to the door.

Vila felt moved to protest that KAT was his. He had found the little machine, he claimed, which gave him the right of ownership. What gave Avon his special interest in it now, he wanted to know. Without speaking Avon took the box out of his pocket and threw it across to Vila. 'OK you carry it,' he said, and started towards the ladders that led to the main airlock. Looking grim Vila took the machine between his thumb and forefinger, holding it tight, turning to follow Avon. But before he could move there was a bang, a hiss and a flash of lights on every control panel in the control room.

'It's the main entry lock,' said Korell. 'Opening.' Even now her voice lacked alarm. It was calm, clear; as if she were announcing to friends that dinner was ready. It made Vila nervous having someone that cool next to him.

Avon touched several controls, flicking through a variety of positions on the monitors until he picked up a figure making his way along the final short corridor towards the control room. As Avon spotted him the figure

reached the entry hatch for the main deck. The door slid to one side and revealed a short, fragile, darkly-tanned young man with wild white hair, wearing a plain white smock over plain white trousers. His face seemed locked into an awkward grin, his ears stuck out more than they should, his nose was a little too long for his face, his hands held at strange angles. With no weapon to pull Avon sat back in his chair giving out an air of nonchalance that Vila for one certainly did not feel. Everyone waited for the uninvited guest to speak, but he didn't. He grinned, opened and closed his mouth, and regularly changed his weight from one foot to another.

Eventually it was Vila who broke the silence, with the not wholly original question, 'Who are you?'

If the creature before them heard he gave no sign of acknowledgement. He continued to stand, shifting his weight. Vila repeated the question. Korell stood up. The stranger seemed surprised, and rapidly moved backwards. Before Korell had fully risen he was out into the corridor, and pushing his way down the steps into the main air lock and out onto the planet's surface.

'Presumably,' said Korell, 'we should follow.' She raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips, waiting for Avon's opinion.

'Why not?' said Avon. 'He's heading for the wall. Vila – give me KAT.'

Vila looked down and found he was gripping the box tighter than ever. He was too shaken by the experience of the stranger to complain. He handed it over and finally found his voice. 'I suppose neither of you has thought that this might be a trap.'

'We've got to leave the ship to get the crystals. We don't know where the crystals are, but I can tell you there is no record of them being found under lawns of well-mown grass. So we have to go somewhere.'

'No, we never thought of that, Vila,' said the thief to himself. 'What an idea. Who'd ever want to spring a trap on us on an unknown uncharted planet?...' He was still talking as he stepped onto the grass, and gave

himself an even bigger shock than he'd had so far. The air was fresh, but then that was what the instrumentation had said. The grass felt like grass, but no one had suggested otherwise. The problem was that the wall had gone. In its place was a perfectly stable, normal (if rather huge) building. The white stranger was nowhere to be seen.

Each of the three carried a bag – but only Vila's was full – it was his tool kit. And he spent much of the walk across the grass reminding the other two of the unequalness of the distribution, alternating this only with comments on the foolishness of staying on the planet at all. Korell did point out the obvious once – that their bags were for sygnum, and would later be heavier than Vila's kit, but it had no effect. Vila was in complaining mood and no one was going to stop him. By and large no one tried.

As they approached the building it became clear that it was an edifice on an enormous scale. Not only was it imposing in terms of height and width but it had a depth which the crew of *Revenge* had not appreciated from their ground position. Lacking any other landmark, they headed for the lofty pillars that marked out one of many entrances around the building into which the stranger could have disappeared. As they approached they saw a number of points where broad stone steps came out of the grass leading up to a wide walkway, made of the same grey stone. It gave the place the air of a museum, with recesses set into the towering walls.

As the trio approached it became clear that there were two types of break in the building. At regular intervals there were what could have been doorways, twenty feet high and six feet wide. Between them, more irregularly spaced, were lighter regions where it almost seemed as if something had been set into the stone: something that was more than just a change in texture or colour. Something that might once have been alive.

'About ten miles long at a rough estimate,' said Korell to no one in particular.

‘And a couple of miles wide,’ added Vila, glad to have something to talk about. He was plagued by a nasty feeling that at any second the ever-changing wall would return, the grass would become carnivorous and he would be buried under a hail of bricks. ‘So what do you need to keep in a building with that sort of area? And why surround it by mile after mile of grass?’ He sat down, only to instantly remember his past fears. He shot to his feet and checked his backside for teeth marks.

Avon turned to Korell. ‘What made you land here? Why choose this spot?’

‘Not chosen so much as given: this is where we ended up. That buffeting took the ship all over the place. I redefined my job as keeping *Revenge* the right way up and in one piece.’

‘So this is the place we are supposed to be,’ said Avon. ‘There’s a door, Vila.’

There was no sign of how the thing opened, but Vila, back on his home territory mentally if not physically, got to work in as business like way as possible: listening, watching gauges on the long tube that he placed against the door, first vertical then horizontal, and finally at 45 degrees. He next attached three microprobes to the door and stood back. After a moment waiting, with no developments that would have had any significance to a non-thief, he packed everything back into his box. Turning, he found Korell and Avon sitting on the stone steps looking back over the grassland towards their ship – now tiny but reassuringly still there in the far distance. Determined to prove his value to Korell he turned back to the door. Careful not to make the slightest sound he gave it the most gentle push he could contrive. Despite its enormous apparent weight the door gave immediately. It wasn’t, he recalled later, as if it swung open. It was rather as if it gave way; as if it simply ceased to exist.

Vila’s desperate shout had Avon and Korell on their feet within a second, but by the time they reached the opening Vila had gone. The door remained

ajar; inside there appeared to be no inside at all. All that could be seen was the same grasslands they had just crossed. The same except for one thing. On the grasslands that appeared to be 'inside' the building there was no *Revenge*. There was also no Vila.

Korell was the first to react visibly to the situation. 'Give me your hand, Avon,' she demanded. Avon did not respond. Korell looked at him intently. 'Are you going to leave him in there – wherever there is?'

Avon looked from Korell to the door and back again. 'Well now,' he said. 'It's a tempting possibility.'

'Avon, I know about your dedicated self-interest. I also know that you value Vila as a thief able to do something you can't. So don't tell me that you don't want to rescue him.'

To the outsider it would have appeared at that moment as if Avon was carefully considering Korell's point of view. In fact he was considering her knack for expounding views which most people could only put forward when in some sort of self-justifying rage. There was a bitterness implied in what she said but it didn't show. Avon noted it as a clever trick, an important element in the lady's armoury.

'All right,' he said. 'But don't complain to me about the results. This is your idea.'

Korell did not seek to argue. Instead she held out a hand and instructed Avon to pull her backwards as she touched the door. Getting the best footing he could on the stone floor Avon did as he was asked, whilst Korell gingerly prodded the door with one finger. Without a sound the opening seemed to move away from them, and a great force pulled both Avon and Korell into the yawning gap.

As Korell slipped further through the opening Avon let go, a faint smile playing on his lips as he watched her vanish. On the far side of the still open door the grass remained but Korell was not on it. There was in fact nothing but grass. Carefully Avon moved back from the door, across the stone floor

and down the wide entrance steps to the grass. For the first time he put his hands down and touched it, pulling gently. Several tufts came away quite easily. He walked back up the steps towards the now seemingly closed door, stopping by Vila's tool kit. From it he removed an aluminium probe and pushed it against the door. Again he felt the section pulling him in, but the probe had left him far enough back to avoid being drawn through. The aluminium, he noted, also reduced the power somewhat. As door turned into opening Avon threw the grass in. This time he was not pulled forward but thrust backwards by the force. Picking himself up Avon slowly made his way down the steps and started the long walk back to the ship.

To Vila the appearance of Korell out of nothing was like a prayer answered. Having arrived he knew not where he sat on the grass, pushing his previous fears out of his mind, and did nothing. He was scared. Aliens, he knew for sure, were playing with him. They wanted to get some fun. All right, they could show themselves first. He stood up and shouted, daring them to come out from hiding. Pausing for breath he listened to the eerie silence. It made him nervous. He started to walk, muttering all the while, to keep himself company. After ten paces he realised he had no idea where to walk to. The horizon was unvaried in all directions. He cursed the grass and sat down again. He cursed the aliens. He cursed Avon, and running out of everything else to curse he contemplated cursing Korell, at which moment she suddenly appeared ten feet away from him. And as always she didn't seem the slightest bit put out by the turn of events.

‘It would be too much to suppose that you have worked out a plan of campaign, wouldn't it?’ she grinned.

Delicately she moved her hand through her hair, looked around, and helped Vila to his feet, whilst announcing that it was time to start walking.

‘You know the way?’ asked Vila quickly, trying to fall into step alongside her.

‘When we walked from *Revenge* to the building the sun was to our left. When I went through that door I felt a strong push forward, which means we have probably landed a distance behind the building relative to *Revenge*.

Therefore we have to walk back to the building, go around it, and then walk on to the ship. So we walk with the sun to our right, OK?’

‘OK,’ said Vila with genuine admiration. Then he stopped, started to argue, but then ran to catch up Korell who refused to discuss anything whilst not on the move. ‘You said that building was about six miles long – and we can’t even see it yet. And then it’s another couple of miles to the ship.’ Just the thought of it made Vila exhausted. ‘And besides we may not have been pushed forward. Maybe time passed without our knowing and the sun has now crossed the sky.’

‘Or maybe it’s a double sun, and the one we saw before has now set and this is its binary partner.’ said Korell.

‘Yes... What?’

Korell laughed, looked at Vila, but kept on at a brisk pace. ‘Of course there could be a million reasons why this direction is wrong. The alternative is to sit and wait for something to happen. And something might not happen. Or what happens might not be very nice. So we go for a walk. The gravity is low and the planet is small. Which means we cover the ground faster and the horizon is closer. So the building may not be that far away after all. All right?’

She had spoken quickly, and it sounded convincing. Vila continued to look glum. He tried a different tack. ‘They can’t just leave us here, can they? I mean, they brought us here. What’s the point?’

‘They didn’t bring us here, Vila, we came to steal their sygnum and we know that no one else seems to have got away with the stuff. So don’t be too hopeful.’

‘I’m not. I’m used to adventures with Avon which turn out like this...’

Vila chattered on, making a strong effort to keep up with Korell, consoling himself all the while that at least he now had a chance to be with her on his own, without Avon around, and without distractions. If only she wouldn’t walk so fast.

After fifteen minutes a form began to take shape on the horizon. After half an hour it was clearly the building they had experienced before. After an hour they reached it.

The entrance looked the same as it had from what was, according to Korell, the opposite direction. Korell walked up the stone stairway to the first door.

‘You’re not going through it again are you?’ asked Vila, horrified. ‘We can walk round.’

‘I thought you didn’t want to go the extra six miles? Besides the only way back to where you started is to retrace your steps.’

Vila seemed unsure. Korell put a friendly arm around him; it changed his entire outlook on life. ‘Supposing this is the same planet as the ship was on before, but a different dimension? Suppose anything Vila, but take it from me the best chance we have is going back the way we came.’ And without further debate Korell walked up to the door and went through.

Alone, Vila took a quick look back, found the endless grass no less enticing than it had been as he walked over it, and followed Korell through.

Vila had expected to land on grass, and he did. What he didn’t expect was to find himself in a metal cage. Next door was another cage, occupied by Korell. There were other cages on either side. They were empty. There was no sign of Avon or *Revenge*.

Ahead was the building, looking as it had looked before. The sun, sky and grass, which made up the rest of the environment, looked much the same.

‘How do you explain this one?’ Vila shouted.

‘With extreme difficulty,’ came the relaxed reply. ‘Don’t worry Vila. It could have been worse. Supposing whoever put us here lived in swamps and marshlands.’

‘Well?’

‘You’d have got wet feet.’

Vila, for once, was dreaming up a witty reply, when a sound from near the building made him turn away from Korell's cage. A group of people, similar in stature and clothing to the stranger who had entered the *Revenge* was making its way across the grass. The people came out of nowhere, talking in a curious language, half distinguishable, half not, pointing, jumping and laughing at the cages.

'Our captors,' announced Korell. 'Don't scowl at them Vila, they might take offence.'

Vila tried his best not to show any emotions at all and sat down. The leader of the group, wearing baggy green trousers and a short-sleeved shirt, touched a control at the door of the cage and let Vila out.

'A good job you just did that,' said Vila. 'I was about to pick the lock.'

'Without your tool kit?' asked Korell without malice. 'And where would you have gone?' she added as she herself was let free.

Vila ignored the question. 'What are they going to do now?'

'The traditional approach is to take us to a dark and rather oppressive little room and keep us locked up for several days without food or water. Then they take us one by one for a spot of torture, demanding to know how we got here, what we wanted, how many of us are there. If tradition holds true this should also be a time of national crisis for them, when they are at their most jumpy, in which case we shall immediately be accused of being enemy agents. They could of course decide to kill us at once, or maybe they'll tear you apart limb from limb and rape me, or if I am lucky sell me as a slave to the local war lord.'

Vila turned away. He decided he was going off this girl.

Korell however was still smiling. She stood, hands on hips talking gently whilst watching the aliens. As if on a cue the strangers began to push and prod their captives. But just as the pushing was about to get too intense for Vila's liking, more people arrived. These were older. Men and women with short hair and more restrained clothes. At the first sight of them the

youngsters took fright, ran to the building and dived as one through the door.

‘Rescue?’ asked Korell.

‘Or a fate worse than death,’ suggested Vila. ‘Still you’re right about one thing. The kids were jumpy.’

The opening words of the leader of the new group seemed, in tone at least, reassuring. Since they were spoken in an alien tongue it was only the tone that could be judged.

A hand was held out in welcome by the apparent leader, a tall man aged in Earth terms about 35, with quick blue eyes and strong arms. He spoke carefully and deliberately. His manner was friendly, but cautious. Korell had a distinct feeling that although not armed he could pose a threat at any moment if he so wished.

Seeing his words were not understood the man rapidly switched to Terran, which he spoke with a perfect, if somewhat archaic accent. ‘I must apologise for the behaviour of our young friends. They are used to playing with androids, rather than real people. Allow me to escort you back to your ship – it is unfair on our children to stand talking in their area. And you must forgive our not recognising your esteemed selves. We assumed, because of your problems with the museum, that you could not be of the Federation. Now I see by your language you are. Many come and try to steal a quick use of our secrets and the glorious Federation has taught us eternal vigilance.

‘We shall have to make a report,’ announced Korell, putting an arm around Vila in the hope of distracting him from the conversation. ‘As we walk back, perhaps you will explain what has been going on? I shall not report everything of course, you can rely on my discretion, but it would be better to give me the full picture.’

‘No death rays, no torture,’ said Vila.

‘You are most gracious madam,’ said the man, ignoring the thief. Yet just as the explanation was about to commence he suddenly stopped walking and held his hand to his heart. There was a brief look of anguish on his face. The attack, if that’s what it was, passed rapidly; the man resumed at his previous pace as if nothing had happened.

‘You have a splendid imagination,’ he said. ‘You must be Vila.’

‘My fame has spread far and wide,’ the thief replied pompously.

‘Everyone knows of Blake and his team. If the young people had known with whom they were playing they would have shown more respect, I can assure you, although it might have shattered their illusions somewhat to find that the heroes of their story books could be captured so easily.’

‘And a good job it was that they let us out at that moment. There could have been trouble.’

Korell interrupted Vila. ‘I would rather hear from our hosts about this planet and its inhabitants,’ she said, ‘than a series of boasts from you about what you would, or would not, have done, given the chance.’

Vila gave way to a sullen silence. In the distance *Revenge* could clearly be seen as it emerged above the horizon. As they got closer it also became possible to make out areas of grassland that had been dug up, not only by the landing of the ship, but also by someone or something else. The marks, Vila was sure, had not been there before.

‘This planet you call Skat is known to us as Re-Ter-Al – in our language it means the World of the Golden Gift. My name is Levarll. My friends and I are from Earth. We are representatives of the Federation.’

Vila stopped dead in his tracks. Korell kept walking alongside the speaker, raising only one quizzical eyebrow in response to this revelation.

‘Five hundred years ago when the inhabitants of Earth started to colonise this part of the Galaxy they looked at this world, and found it beautiful, but of little value. There were no minerals, not enough wild animals to kill for meat, not enough fish in the oceans to catch, and it was too far from the

developing trade routes to be of use. But it appeared a very pleasant place to live. The grass grew easily in minimal rainfall, in many parts of the planet the local stone made good building material, and the climate generally was very pleasing. So they put a basic research team down. A small population can be maintained here easily, and we have always been a small population.

‘The research team’s mission was to look into new methods of high speed transmission of messages across the galaxy. The work was considered politically sensitive at the time, and so the group was isolated. The research teams were permitted to bring their families with them. It was supposed to be at most a three year project, and the place looked nice, so everyone agreed to the isolation. But after two years our ancestors discovered an unexpected spin-off from their research. They found, as expected and as the theories predicted, that they were able to speed up messages so they travelled faster than light. However, as the signals approached speeds that made transmission from system to system practical – the sort of thing you take for granted now – they found they were actually changing the very fabric of the Galaxy itself. Only by tiny amounts, nothing more than a few electrons per second of message, but it was enough to divert several of the greatest minds of the original researchers onto a new problem.’

‘And before the three years were up they cracked it?’ suggested Korell.

‘You are perceptive,’ Levarll told her. ‘They found out the cause of the electron disintegration, and a way through into what was hitherto little more than a dream – a new universe. A universe that turned out to be just one in a series of parallel existences. And not just one series but thousands – millions. More than could be counted. Each reality slightly different from our own.’

‘And we have been to one,’ said Korell.

‘The large building – our museum – acts as a control operating one of the gateways into another world. It is one that is reserved for our youngsters – it take them into worlds that are safe.’

‘They certainly seem safe,’ said Vila. ‘There’s nothing but grass anywhere.’

‘Near the museum, yes. In fact most of the entrances are real entrances to a real museum. We come here for picnics, and debates. It’s a very pleasing environment in which to learn about your past. And we are very concerned that everyone should know about our past.’

‘That isn’t an attitude widely encouraged in the Federation,’ Korell pointed out.

Levarll ignored the comment and continued his tale as they approached *Revenge*. ‘The discovery of alternative worlds leading to infinitely varied existences was deemed so important by our ancestors, the original colonisers, that certain decisions were taken – including one that said that Earth should not know about the discovery – at least for a little while. The idea was to keep quiet until the three years was up, whilst during the remaining months the implications of the discovery would be worked out. However, it was soon realised that our ancestors were not the only ones who had broken through the electron barriers. And that gave them a problem. But we are almost back at your ship – let us find Avon and continue the story with him present. Then you can decide what you wish to do.’

As the group approached the ship Avon, never content with waiting to be found, appeared at the main hatch. Vila announced the latest news with enthusiasm.

Avon looked unmoved. ‘White holes!’ he said as Vila concluded. ‘Well now, that is, to say the least, world shattering.’

‘Kerr Avon, your mind is all it is reputed to be.’

‘This is Levarll,’ explained Vila. ‘They’ve heard of our reputation. And Levarll has been really helpful since we got dragged through that building. It’s an event horizon...’

‘If they’ve heard of your reputation,’ Avon replied, ‘I’m surprised they haven’t locked you up by now.’ Suddenly he seemed to change tack. ‘It’s time to go. Unless you prefer to stay here chatting with your new-found friends.’

‘Avon!’ Vila was upset. ‘These people are friendly. They can help us. They’ve already rescued us.’

‘Very well,’ said Avon. He stepped back onto the ship’s entry bay and then turned. ‘I should stand back if I were you – the blast from the ship can be considerable when it’s lying flat.’ And with that he disappeared into *Revenge*. Within a second Korell was on board, dragging Vila with her. But Vila didn’t like being forced.

‘Logically,’ said Korell, pushing him up the gangway and then along the stair shaft that led to the upper deck, ‘if there is a reason for getting out quickly then it is not a good idea to discuss it in front of the enemy.’

Vila decided not to protest at this obvious misuse of the word ‘enemy’. He’d had enough protesting. It was just the law of life. If he wanted to stay, they went. If he said leave, they stayed. If he wanted to be in sector 8 at the edge of the Galaxy, they went to Earth. This was Vila’s law, he decided.

In the control room Avon rapidly started the ramjet firing sequence. ‘They are letting us go, Avon,’ Vila told him, despite all his resolutions on the way up. ‘Doesn’t that indicate something?’

‘That is the most worrying thing,’ Avon replied. ‘Korell, get this ship ready for take-off as fast as possible – but do not go up.’

‘Conscience?’ she asked. Avon looked puzzled. ‘You don’t want to injure those people.’

‘It is just that we are not going up,’ he said. ‘Ease up ten feet and then head straight for that building, preferably for the door.’

‘Avon...’

‘Vila, if you are so convinced of their friendliness you can try and explain what three Federation pursuit ships are doing coming in to land at

this very moment – without the slightest problem from the sophisticated devices your friends used to try to scare us off in the first place.’

‘I thought it funny when they welcomed us as Federation people and then welcomed us just as much when they found out who we really were. I don’t suppose you’ve had time to fix a plasma shield?’

‘No I haven’t. Which is why we are not heading up into the air.’

‘So where are we going?’

‘Straight through that doorway.’

‘But it’s not big enough to throw a whole ship through.’

‘If it really is a white hole then it will simply expand to accept us. We’ll soon know. Without shielding there is nowhere else to go. Get this straight, Vila. The whole planet is a trap and we walked into it.’

As Avon spoke, Korell was bringing the ship to readiness for a run at the building. On the ground the inhabitants of Skat were running left and right trying to escape the massive downdraft that the ship made when taking off from a prone position.

‘Anyway, what is the point of being in an alternative universe?’ asked Vila above the fusion howl.

‘Answer that yourself,’ Korell told him. ‘You are in it.’

Below, the world was bleak and windswept. There was no sign of the grassy landscape, nor even the building they had just rammed.

Avon looked hard at the information coming from the panels surrounding him, then looked up. ‘Korell?’

‘It’s just possible that the push through the gate gave us an unexpected leap far in excess of anything the ship’s drive had on offer.’

‘Get us away from this planet and get a fix on the location.’

‘Avon, Korell...’ pleaded Vila. ‘What is going on?’

Korell locked the drive into position, and looked at the controls. ‘Vila, it’s like this. I haven’t the faintest idea what has happened. I don’t know where we are. I don’t know when we are. I’m fairly uncertain if we are still

in our own universe. And I can't even be sure that the normal laws of science apply out here. The universe has eleven dimensions. We could be locked at a tangent to any of them. Does that put your mind at rest?'

'Oh yes, wonderful. So far since we approached that planet I've seen a living crumbling wall turn into a building which had a locked door that dragged me through it when it opened; been taken on a twenty-mile hike; put in a cage; and sent through a white hole. And now you tell me you don't know what is going on. If you want my advice...'

'No,' said two voices.

'I'll tell you anyway,' said Vila.

'I was afraid of that,' Avon replied caustically.

'What we should be doing is setting ourselves up so we can live out our lives, or what is left of them, in peace and tranquillity. You Avon should come clean and explain why you shot Blake, and what your next great scheme is and if it involves the death of me; and when you've finished that lot you can let me know why you were so sure that those people down there were Federation agents or whatever. As you pointed out in the past there were many times when they could have shot us if they wanted and they didn't – they let us through.'

Avon was silent for a moment and then spoke quietly. 'Vila, you were never very bright at the best of times, and this doesn't seem to be the best of times.'

Before Vila could come back with further demands Korell gave a call.

'We are two thousand spacials from Skat and according to the positions of all the stars that is still Skat.'

'All right, let's take another look. Go back down Korell.'

Vila objected. 'Last time we went down the ship was nearly blown to bits.'

'So would you rather rush around this galaxy without even knowing if we can get back to our own time through the white hole?'

Korell was less hopeful. 'It's unlikely the white hole still exists, after driving the ship through it.'

'The building may have been destroyed,' Avon told her, 'but something must be left.'

Yet he was wrong. The descent to the planet was uneventful, and the new Skat nothing but barren rock. In vain they searched for any sign of the building. 'In this galaxy, the building simply doesn't exist,' said Korell. 'The original colonisers never came.'

'It goes back further than that,' Avon told her. 'The weather conditions were never right to create the grasslands. This is a very different universe.'

Vila gave up. If this was another universe he didn't fancy it, and was sure he could create a better version. He opened a locker to the side of his position and reached in for the container of para-hyrene. He found only thin air. Turning, he saw Avon holding the small phial. Vila tried to grab it, but Avon pulled back. In his other hand Avon was holding KAT. 'When did you last use this?'

'I haven't,' said Vila.

'Very well,' Avon replied equitably. 'But you tested it on KAT.'

'I gave KAT a drop to make sure it was the real stuff, after the first run into Skat. I didn't fancy too many more of those.' He made another grab for the container and Avon let him take it. Without speaking Vila left the flight deck for the solitude and alternative realities of his own cabin. In every respect he had had enough.

'Mysteries galore,' said Korell after Vila had gone. 'I presume at least you solved the sygnum problem. You wouldn't have left the planet so rapidly otherwise, no matter what the threat.'

Avon acknowledged the deduction. 'The sygnum was there all the time in the grass,' he told her. 'It was the grass, as KAT later confirmed. We expected to find it as crystals because that is how we have always experienced it. But in its raw state it is quite different, and by and large

harmless. To collect it you need a lawn mower – then you can make enough shielding to protect a fleet of ships.’

‘Or much more than that if you could drop through the white hole and find more Skats packed with lawns of sygnum. And I presume you saw, as I felt, that on walking through the doorway one is lifted off the ground. As if it were important that you don’t make contact with both sides of the door at once.’

Avon sat down and stared at the monitors. ‘I took something that was from one side of the doorway – the grass – and sent it to the other side. The result was an explosion. So,’ he continued quickly, almost bored by having to restate the obvious, ‘you have white holes from one time-space continuum into another. Plus all the shielding you could ever need. And then you decide not to let anyone come near you. And that leaves the question – what are you afraid of?’

‘Levarll told us that his ancestors found that they were not the first to get through the white holes. They therefore knew the story of the sygnum would get out – if not through this continuum, then through another. And the last thing their ancestors wanted was to draw attention to a beautiful planet by making it some kind of impenetrable fortress. So they just gave people a bumpy ride. Most give up, a few get through. Those who do get through can be dealt with by the gateway. Most will probably get hopelessly lost in other time-space zones. Vila and I had the good sense to jump back through the gateway in the opposite way to which we went in. You had the sense not to go in in the first place. But even so we have now ended up in another universe, which doesn’t make us too great on the escapology ratings. But you do have a penchant for non-urban environments. I wonder why.’

Avon looked away from the monitors and glanced at Korell. He said nothing and returned to the screens, typing out new instructions on the touch controls.

‘I know that withering look,’ Korell said. ‘Are you going to tell me where I am wrong, or do I have to guess?’

Avon remained silent.

‘All right,’ the woman said. ‘I’ll amuse you, Avon. I’ll talk through the problems. First, they welcomed us as honoured guests of the Federation, and then as honoured rebels. So who do they give allegiance to? Second, their ancestors worked for the Federation, but tried to keep information from the Administration on Earth. The knowledge of white holes is widespread, but I’ve never heard a rumour that their locations are known. Some people in the Federation could know about the locations, but if they do they probably use that knowledge for their own benefit. That would mean the ships you spotted were not here on official Federation business, but probably ruling Skat through the threat that if the Federation proper ever gets in life will be a lot worse. That would explain why ships are not shot down as they approach Skat, because that could attract the attention of Federation officials who are not actually in on the secret.’

Korell paused and thought. Avon’s silence indicated that she was not on the right track. She could acknowledge that she had no proof, but the explanation itself seemed logically sound and without some evidence to disprove it she couldn’t accept Avon’s attitude. She was either missing a clue, or an essential piece of information. She sat down to think. Something deep in her brain told her it was to do with the ground, the earth, natural, growing things. The trees on Gauda Prime, the grass on Skat...

For five days the ship stayed in orbit around the barren rock that Skat had become. Avon moved from the control cabin into the ship’s cargo bay and set up a workshop which would convert the grass-sygnum into material that could be used as part of the new shielding. The cargo bay on *Revenge* was large, some two hundred yards square, designed to carry the cargo that the freighter ship would have plied between the planets. Set in the roof were

four single lamps which gave out strong, but not glaring light – very much to Avon’s liking. His suit got dirty again, but he didn’t change. He cut back on the sleep, knowing that every moment the ship was without shielding was another moment of vulnerability. He also cut communication down to a minimum.

At first the floor of the hold seemed to Vila, who did much of the fetching and carrying, to be covered in dirt and grass. But as time went by the amount of grass diminished and the small containers that Avon had put on the metal shelving around the edge of the hold began to be filled with a fine white powder. Avon worked without machines, for there were none on board that would suit his purpose, and could be seen grinding the grass into pulp in trays with a makeshift pestle and mortar, before taking the containers carefully down to the drive room where the fusion process engines continued at the lowest level, providing just enough power to keep the ship in its orbit. That power was also just enough to generate the heat that Avon needed to turn the paste into crystals.

As the process developed Vila began to find that, apart from the occasional bit of clearing up and physical labour, he was required less and less in the hold. Having had one bout of para-hyrene he refrained from entering that other world again. He talked with KAT but the talk got boring. Even the cocktails KAT suggested were beginning to pall a little.

At length, with no other conversation around and no other tasks to perform Vila began to talk to the main ship’s computer. The machine answered always without any sign of personality – giving responses in a flat monotone. That was to be expected – no one would bother to give a freighter computer a personality. But it didn’t stop Vila.

‘You’re boring, you know that,’ Vila told the machine. The computer did not reply, as he knew it would not. It only gave specific information on specific requests. It did not even seek to explain itself. ‘Worse than Orac,’ Vila concluded. As he explained to the machine, ‘Orac had opinions – even

if they were pompous. You have nothing. You don't even have a name.' The machine remained silent, its lights showing only the standard red 'alert' light. 'I'll give you a name,' Vila told it. The computer did not seem impressed. Vila leaned across and pressed the 'learn' contact. A second red light appeared. 'From now on you will respond to the name...' He paused. What name? How do you go about naming a computer? Vila tried hard to focus his mind, but no thought sharpened up. He took another sip of his drink. His mind wandered. He thought of Korell, currently resting on her bed. He thought of Avon endlessly slaving away to get the ship prepared. But for what? His thought drifted uneasily through the five turbulent years since he had been found guilty and sentenced to deportation for life on Cygnus Alpha. He thought of all the people he had been with since then. Gan, Jenna, Cally, Tarrant, Dayna, Soolin, and of course Blake. Blake: the great champion of the Freedom Party dedicated to fighting the Federation's overwhelming power. Eventually even the official vidnews broadcasts recognised their existence, frequently reporting that 'one of the infamous, so-called "Blake's Seven" had been captured' – or arrested, killed, maimed, destroyed, eaten alive or whatever suited their propaganda purposes that day. Blake's Seven, and in five years there had been seven deaths. Now there was nothing but the memory of seven dead friends.

An idea came into Vila's head followed by a smile. 'Computer, my old friend,' he said, ignoring for the moment the previous names he had called the machine. 'I have a name for you. You will only respond to this name, and not to any other name in future, and that order cannot be countermanded. You have a name. Your name is – Blake.' And that, thought Vila, should cause a bit of anguish to pass through Avon's mind, next time he had to ask the computer for help.

Vila pondered his action and took another drink. He looked at the machine – at Blake – and pulled his thoughts together. One of KAT's better ideas for sifting out wine that tasted intoxicating but didn't impair

judgement seemed to be working. Vila should have been half drunk, but felt only inspired by the alcohol. 'Blake,' he announced. 'You need a personality. I can't give you Blake's personality, or else you would send us tearing around the Galaxy trying to defeat the Federation all over again. And,' he added realistically, 'because I don't know that much about programming, I'll give you the instructions verbally. You will obey the instructions I give you on how to behave on all – I repeat all – future occasions. No contrary instructions can be given.' Vila was starting to enjoy this. He began to stroll up and down the empty flight deck. As he gave instructions he gestured with his arms, his voice getting more lyrical, his language more flamboyant. Soon he began to feel a sense of real power, but his brain was clear enough to instil a sense of realism. He knew if he went too far Avon would find ways of bypassing the instructions, and all would be lost. Vila had to take the matter carefully, add a little day by day... He warmed to the idea.

Avon wasted no time resting once he had finished the main work of preparing the sygnum. He banged on Korell's door and demanded her presence in the control room with him. He was covered in a mixture of grass and white powder. 'You look terrible,' Vila told him. 'Still, I suppose you have the consolation of knowing that if anyone fires a plasma bolt at you it will bounce off.'

Avon ignored the remark and turned to Korell as she entered. 'What have you found, or have you been sleeping the past five days?'

Korell was unruffled. Vila looked at her afresh. It seemed that whatever clothes she wore they looked as if they were exactly the right choice for her. Today she appeared in a velvet jacket and faded blue trousers. 'I have a galaxy with some communication traffic but not as much as there should be. A definite increase in communications towards the first sector...'

'Earth!'

‘Quite probably, Vila, although in this universe nothing is certain.’

‘There’s virtually nothing around here. No sound of the normal Federation computer talk. Very little sign of interstellar movement generally, and absolutely nothing on Skat.’

‘Good,’ announced Avon. ‘Take the ship down and land. Vila and I will need about three hours outside the ship to fix the shielding completely.’

‘Not again,’ pleaded Vila. ‘Not down there. I know it was all clear last time, but I don’t really want another buffeting. Can’t you fix the thing in orbit?’

Avon smiled, and turned gently towards Vila, one hand raised, a finger pointing. He hesitated for one moment, and then spoke. ‘Vila, you’re right.’

‘Am I? If you say so I must be wrong.’

‘We shall fit the shield in space. Get a suit on.’

‘A space suit?’

‘You could try an underwater diving suit, but I’m not sure it would work.’

‘I’m not putting that space suit on again, and that’s final.’

Avon took on the attitude of a kindly uncle dealing with a rather unintelligent nephew. ‘Vila, if you go outside into space, in orbit, without a suit, you will not be able to breathe.’

‘I know that. That’s what I am saying. I’m not going outside.’

‘Fine. Sit down. Korell, take us down.’

‘Computer,’ announced Korell. ‘Give me a descent path to an open plain on the planet’s surface.’

There was silence.

Vila coughed. ‘I, er, gave the computer a name,’ he said diffidently. ‘It seemed a shame not to have a computer with a name.’

‘What name?’

Vila told him. Avon’s face remained blank. It was impossible to read his thoughts. Korell just laughed, and repeated the order. ‘It is on your screen,

Korell,' the computer replied.

Avon and Korell looked up at the computer simultaneously. Vila tried to look the other way. 'You can take over controls yourself, or you can return the ship to my control and leave yourself free for other tasks.'

'And I gave it a bit of personality. Just to make it more friendly.'

'Any other bits of the ship you've decided to play with in the last few days?' demanded Avon. 'Navigational instruments only responding to the Galaxy's known gambling dens? Monitors only showing the outside environment when they think it is pretty?'

'Nothing especially,' Vila announced.

Korell came to his rescue. 'Do you want this ship down or do you want to have a row with Vila?' she asked Avon.

'Put us down,' came the terse reply.

'Blake,' said the pilot.

'I know,' replied the computer.

‘There are only three ways back into our own time and space,’ Avon announced. ‘First, through a white hole. The trouble is that a white hole is the point at which material sucked into a black hole emerges, and that’s difficult to find without the right equipment, which we don’t have; and impossible to enter, unless held stable by a six-mile-square building created by technology which we certainly do not possess, and which is also not widely available even to the upper hierarchy of the Federation.’ He looked at Korell. She wondered if he was giving her a clue. ‘Then there are stable black holes and rotating black holes.’

‘I thought all black holes were things to be avoided,’ said Vila.

‘What you think and what is, are normally two different things,’ Avon retorted. ‘Non-rotating black holes lead to singularities at which matter is stripped to nothingness, before being spat out through a white hole. And, apart from that, the tidal forces on a stable black hole would tear the ship apart before we even got near it.

‘Spinning black holes, however, lead to wormholes connecting up all possible universes. They are the links between past, present and future in each and every one of the eleven dimensions.’

‘So we go looking for a rotating black hole, and dive in,’ Vila announced. Then he frowned. ‘How do we find one if it’s a black hole against a black sky?’

‘For a start,’ Korell told him, ‘we can’t just find any spinning black hole. This is all outside my field but the little astro-physics I do know suggests

we need a black hole that is big enough not to tear us apart.'

'The tidal force of a spinning black hole is inversely proportional to the square of the mass of the hole,' said Blake.

'Eh?' said Vila.

'That will teach you to go round handing out gratuitous personalities that offer information,' Korell told him.

'Well I only did it because Orac kept refusing to talk to us.'

'The bigger the black hole, Vila, the lower the gravity field output, which is the main danger of the ship being torn apart,' the computer continued. 'So go and look for the biggest black hole you can find – one that is at least two thousand times larger than the Earth's sun. There is only one such object.'

'Oh. Where?'

'At the centre of the Galaxy.' Korell and Blake spoke simultaneously. All travellers knew about that black hole; and knew about avoiding it, too.

'There is just one other possibility, however,' continued Korell. 'We don't have to go back to our own universe.'

'Why not?' asked Vila.

'The question should be "why?"' Korell told him. 'I don't seem to recall us having vast hordes of valuable riches stashed away there. Nor yet some loved ones who need to be returned to.'

Avon was guarded in his reply. 'But there is the question of unfinished business,' he said.

'Perhaps you would care to give us details?'

'The business is private,' Avon told her.

'Since it involves risking everything to enter a black hole, and risking everything again to come out in the right time and the right place, and since I don't recall having heard that the insides of black holes are covered with signposts pointing the way to each reality, it seems quite a risk without a full knowledge of why.'

‘You would like to stay?’ asked Avon.

‘Possibly,’ Korell replied.

‘And what do you offer us if we stay? Life on board this freighter until we grow senile and can’t work the controls; or until we get so mad with each other we end up locked in our own rooms never daring to come out for fear of being talked to by a computer programmed by Vila? Is that what you want?’

‘I offer nothing, Avon. What do you want? The chance to settle old scores?’

‘But in this reality,’ said Vila, ‘there are parallels to our own galaxy?’ Korell confirmed the supposition. ‘Then there might be another me.’

‘That seems a good enough reason for going back,’ said Avon.

‘And Blake might still be alive in this reality.’

‘And working as a farm hand on a frontier world having never had a revolutionary thought in his life,’ Korell added. ‘What’s the point of this line of thought, Vila? People may exist, or may not. If you want real parallels you’ve got to get into that black hole and find a reality closer to the one we know than this one is. If you choose to stay it is to make this reality into what you want it to be. You create your life here, and be glad of it.’

‘There is another factor.’ The voice was from Blake.

‘Yes Blake?’ said Vila intently, anxious to calm matters down, and to maintain his affiliation with the computer.

‘The ship, and all of you, are in a universe from which you do not originate. Although this position is stable at the moment, you cannot stay here indefinitely.’

‘How long have we got?’ asked Korell.

‘In eighty-seven hours twenty-three minutes the molecular structure of the ship will start to deteriorate. The structure will become unstable to the

extent of not fulfilling necessary functions twenty-three hours seventeen minutes after that.'

'How...' Korell's voice was cut off by Blake. Following Vila's instructions it always gave relevant information.

'If the ship leaves at once and heads directly for the black hole at the centre of the galaxy at maximum speed then the black hole will be reached within seventy-nine hours.' -

'Not much time to spare,' said Korell.

'So we turn back,' said Avon. 'Now!'

'You have a way of getting what you want,' Korell told him. 'You haven't been tampering with Blake by any chance?'

Avon looked at Korell for a moment. 'You are a beautiful woman,' Avon told her. 'Don't reduce your beauty by stupidity. Take the ship up, we are wasting time.'

Long journeys, as far as Vila was concerned, were becoming slightly more acceptable. For the most part Avon and Korell were deeply involved in computer work. Now Vila could work with KAT and talk to Blake. It helped.

The problem that Avon and Korell each strove to solve in their separate ways was apparent even to Vila with his almost total lack of computer awareness. They had to find a way of entering the black hole, a way of getting through, and worst of all a way of ensuring that they not only emerged but actually emerged in the right time zone and the right continuum. It was a problem beyond the abilities of any individual to solve. Indeed it was beyond the abilities of most thirteenth generation computers.

However, both sets of computations were finished with several hours to spare, and fortunately for the flight deck Korell and Avon produced analyses that agreed. What Avon would have done had Korell actually disputed with him in the area of computer-based analysis Vila dreaded to

think. As the solutions were compared Vila continued to contemplate his new awareness: in every reality another Vila exists; another version of himself with a slightly different persona making himself slightly different. How would he get on with himself – but not himself? Pretty well, he thought. But how would Avon get on with Avon? And how would Avon react if he came face to face with another Blake? Another killing? Reconciliation?

Afterwards, however, Vila's tales were not of multi-person populated realities but of the pain of high-gravity pressure, of the screams from fusion engines asked to do too much, of the way the display screens and the Blake computer could only give out images of streaks of light rather than clear pictures of passing stars, crammed closely together at the galactic centre. He would speak of the looming blackness of the hole itself growing ever larger, and the essential nature of his work relaying data to Korell as she tried to steer *Revenge* into the very centre of the hole itself. Then he told of the all-pervading blackness – the nothingness showing up on the screens and the long battle to turn the ship precisely so that they exited the way they had come. But, as the calculations had shown, they had to leave at a velocity just different enough to allow them to compensate for the injection of power that *Revenge* had picked up through the white hole. Then the build-up of pressure and noise once more as they left the black hole and re-emerged into the galaxy. Vila would conclude his story with a word about Korell.

Throughout the whole tale he would imply that it was he, Vila, who had got them through, passing on information right and left, keeping a calm head whilst others shouted, acting as a focus for information within the ship. But he would end with a little side line, a trivial incident designed to show his modesty in praising another, and yet leaving his listeners craving more information about the black hole. 'Korell,' he would say, 'fascinated me. As we left the hole and came back into the real world, she calmly

tapped into the communications channels and listened. And that was the whole point.’ (At this juncture he would turn from face to face as if to suggest that anyone closely following his narrative should have realised that point, but for those less well endowed intellectually, he’d spell it out anyway.) ‘We didn’t know if we had come back into our galaxy or not. And she just listened for a few moments, and then calmly said, "I think this is the right place." I find that quite remarkable.’ And then with a half smile he would sit back in his chair, take another good sip at the drink which was given him by hosts and hostesses grateful to have such a tale recounted by one actually there, and wait for the praise and the questions.

Fortunately for Vila, Korell rarely spoke of the journey through the hole, for the simple reason that she never found a need to talk of times past, and when she did speak it was to recall some of her more glorious occasions. For her the past was mainly irrelevant, unless it was used to gain an insight into a problem of the present, or contained within itself a reason for her own present actions. To Korell the only real interest was the future. Reminiscing was a waste of time. But she would sit and listen to others tell of the past, for that gave her a lot of good information concerning the person speaking, information that might come in handy one day. She never gave out such free hints about herself.

Avon too kept silent about the affair. What Vila failed to report, because in reality he had spent much of the journey with his eyes closed and mind very firmly shut, was that Avon had used the last few hours of time they had in the alternative galaxy doing what Vila claimed Korell had done upon their return – listening to communications chatter. Avon had even sent out a few messages himself, trying to learn not only about the galaxy they had entered but also trying to find out the state of the Federation and whatever administration there was in that alternative reality. He also sent out three requests for information about current myths and legends, and received informative, if baffled, replies.

Once through the hole and certain that they were back in their own Galaxy in their own time zone, Korell faced her dilemma once more. In the end she asked Avon directly for information. He looked at the woman, lifted his right hand, pointed a finger in familiar style, but then stopped himself. He turned away. 'We have time distort, we have plasma shielding, we do not have teleport. I thought that was the next move – or do you have something else in mind?'

'I have nothing in mind...' she replied tentatively. Was there some double meaning in the use of that word?

'Then leave the planning to me. But perhaps you wish to leave the ship now?'

'Not after I took so long to find you, Avon.'

'Why did you find me? If you had just wanted Orac you would have left us long ago.'

'Do you want me to leave?'

The question seemed to surprise Avon. He turned to face her squarely. 'Live on this ship alone with Vila, a wine-drinking hand computer and a main computer answering to the name Blake? You are a pilot, and you are prepared to converse with Vila. What more could I ask?'

'The question is not what could you ask, but what could you do? If I am to pilot this ship again it would be helpful to know where I am taking it and why.'

'To find the materials we need for teleport.'

'Not good enough, Avon. Try again.'

Avon's calmness disappeared. 'It does not have to be good enough,' he said aggressively. 'As I have said, you are welcome for the moment to work on this ship. Your skills are good, you are useful. The same can be said of Vila. But make no mistake, you are not indispensable.'

'So you consider it your ship, do you? And what if I said I wanted to go somewhere else?' Her voice continued to be as sweet and gentle as ever.

‘You would start to be tiresome which normally you are not. But I will put you down on the nearest planet. Remember you owe me from Skat – I don’t owe you. And I’ll tell you when I am collecting.’

Korell seemed to consider her position for a moment. ‘Is it really a teleport you are after?’ she asked. When Avon did not respond, she continued half to herself. ‘And after that? When you have built up another ship to rival those you have lost before? What will you do? Track down Servalan?’

‘I told you I have unfinished business.’

‘Does it really matter to you so much?’

‘Certain things matter. We could stay forever drifting in space, watching ourselves decay. Or we could decide to look after ourselves. Revenge against Servalan on its own is meaningless. But revenge allied to a new plan can have some kind of meaning.’

‘So you really are another Blake?’

‘Blake wanted to kill Servalan to build a new and better Galaxy in the glorious name of the Freedom Party. But the Party was corrupted by its own plans even before Blake started using *Liberator*. The Party that Blake had so much feeling for still wanted to control people, to tell them what to do. That power warped his mind. He wanted to destroy Star 1 – do you know what that meant? Star 1 maintained the environment on hundreds of planets. It made worlds that were otherwise useless into places that could be lived on. And he wanted to destroy that, causing the death of countless millions. That is the result of the mindless battle of two political ideals, two political maniacs, Blake against Servalan – each perfectly assured that what they did was for the best.’

‘And you are different.’

‘Well now, you have to decide for me.’

‘All right, let me tell you. Blake felt that he could never be a member of the Federation’s kind of society. He had to oppose the Federation, but he did

so in the name of the grand new society that the Revolution would bring about, with him, presumably, as one of the great leaders. Blake would become a benevolent dictator, which is why you disliked him even more than Servalan. For Servalan, on the other hand, there was no doubt. She wanted to be supreme ruler of everything, with total power of life and death over the million billion souls in the Galaxy. You can understand that. It doesn't appeal to you but you can understand that. But you saw Blake as aiming to gain power through pretending to liberate – that was how you saw him. You saw him as a cheat. You felt all revolutionaries were phony, but Blake was the worst, because he presented himself as something different from the Federation. In Blake's new society everyone would be told how free they were and they would all really believe it. They wouldn't drug the atmosphere any more because everyone would feel for Blake without that sort of treatment. You could see through that. Avon would still be the outlaw in Blake's society just as he was in Servalan's.

'What do you have left, Avon? To be an exile? You thought of that. You thought of taking a ship that was self-sufficient, and just driving it on your own outside society, existing, being. A hermit.

'So what does Avon do? The life within society to you is meaningless. Conforming to the wishes of the Federation of the Average Man is meaningless. The rebellion of Blake is meaningless. Exile is meaningless. You don't want to change anything, except perhaps to kill off Servalan. Everyone else is a fool except Avon.'

Korell looked at the man she had just analysed, but he did not look back. Instead he was staring at the display screens in front of him.

'I have received a message.' It was the voice of the Blake computer.

'I see it,' said Avon still looking at the monitors.

'It is from Federation Space Station Sub-command at grid reference 953 002,' persisted the computer. 'They are demanding information on our flight pattern and on authorisation for our present whereabouts.'

‘Since when did the Federation demand information like that? They normally just shoot first, and then ask you to submit a reference sheet in quadruplicate,’ said Vila.

‘The logical answer,’ Korell told him, ‘is that there is some authorised but unidentifiable space traffic around here. I wonder what it’s up to.’

‘The message is being repeated, and the demand for a reply is getting stronger,’ announced Blake.

Avon pressed the necessary key. ‘We are the space freighter *Revenge* bound for the planet MD2551R carrying supplies of protein supplement.’

‘On what authorisation?’ came the disembodied voice.

‘On the authorisation of the Parliament and Supreme Council of the Planet Rijks,’ said Avon.

‘You will take your craft into orbit around the star lying at grid reference 993 008 so that you can be boarded and your credentials checked.’

Vila got worried. ‘Where did you get that name from?’ he demanded.

‘From the map,’ Avon answered shortly.

‘Well let’s go there, or rather let’s go somewhere. Anywhere.’

‘No,’ said Avon. ‘There is something happening here, and I would like to know what it is. There must be a good reason for the Federation to be unsure of who is on their side and who is not. Blake.’

‘Yes Avon,’ replied the computer.

‘Give me a run-down of all the spaceships within ten thousand spacial of here that are not openly displaying Federation signals.’

‘There are only two such ships. One is a Star Cluster type freighter bearing four by seven by nine distance one thousand five hundred spacial.’

‘And the other?’ asked Vila.

‘Is the freighter *Revenge*,’ said Korell. ‘Is that not right, Blake?’

‘Carrying three people, Vila Restell, Kerr Avon...’

‘Thank you Blake, I think we have the picture,’ said Vila.

‘So shall we go and take a look at whoever or whatever the Federation have us mixed up with?’ said Avon. ‘Or shall we try to outrun them and never know what is going on?’

Put like that Vila found it easy to opt for running away. Korell sided with Avon, however, and as always he was outvoted.

Avon continued with the instructions. ‘Blake, give us a close-up of the star cluster freighter.’ A picture emerged upon the screen. The ship appeared to have undergone substantial modifications, although still bearing some of the hallmarks of the Star Cluster type. Extra sections seemed to have been grafted on the rear ramjets and many of the proper formal markings had also disappeared.

‘How many people on board the ship?’

‘Three people.’ Blake paused. ‘And two vampires.’

‘Servalan!’

‘Servalan would never travel in something looking like that. She always retains a degree of style even if it slows her down,’ Vila objected.

‘Blake,’ commanded Avon, ‘I want a complete spectral analysis of that ship, and when you have it...’

‘I have it Avon.’

‘... I want anything that can be identified as relating directly to the people and the mutoids on the ship removed. Then remove anything relating to the legitimate normal structure of a ship of that type, and then report what you have left. Korell, start manoeuvring towards the location demanded by the Federation ship, but do it slowly and awkwardly. We need time.’

‘The spectrum analysis remaining,’ said Blake, ‘reveals a high degree of sygnum, much converted to crystal form –although far more than is needed to withstand a conventional plasma attack – plus some still in its purest raw form. There is also a substantial amount of RT alloy towards the rear of the ship, probably located in the hold. Finally there is a combination of alloys

and crystals at the very rear of the ship which would indicate major modification to the ship's drive unit.'

Korell and Avon exchanged a long, silent knowing glance. Vila got impatient. 'I know those looks,' he exclaimed. 'So stop playing about. What's going on?' He looked from one to the other but neither made a move to explain. 'It sounds like a description of us. So what does...' Vila's voice trailed away as the implications began to sink in.

Avon smiled condescendingly. 'Raw sygnum is only available in one place. You have been there – you may use the ship's log to remind yourself. You may also remind yourself that that place is half way across the galaxy. And I can't think of too many reasons why you need more sygnum, apart from withstanding an attack, unless you are going through a black hole. RT alloy is used for one thing only, and that is the production of laser infusion side arms. Finally, you don't expect freighters to carry drive modifications. So, Vila, even you may now begin to see that we have just used an exit route from a black hole which someone else is using. And that someone else is also using Skat as the entry point into the other reality.'

'But what for? When we found ourselves in the alternative universe we needed to get out as fast as possible.'

'Quite true,' Korell agreed, 'but we had no plan when we went in there, and we spent a lot of time modifying the ship so we could get out again. Supposing you knew what you were up to. You went in with a plan. We know that particular version of the galaxy is underpopulated. So it makes an ideal spot for gathering raw materials, buying up armaments, modifying ships, in fact everything necessary to prepare for a friendly little war.'

'But if it is Servalan, what is she doing preparing a war?' argued Vila. 'She's never had too much trouble getting ships before.'

'When she was Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the Federation of the Inner and Outer Worlds that was true. And during her short life as President even more true. But now, as a Commissioner of The

Federation she has freedom to roam around the Galaxy investigating crimes, and sorting out local trouble. But that is hardly enough for Servalan, is it?’

‘So you think she’s preparing for a comeback?’

‘I’m damn sure of it,’ Avon told him. ‘And we have just stumbled on her supply route. The question is, what do we do about it?’

‘I don’t suppose running in the opposite direction is one of the options you are considering?’ asked Vila with vain hope.

‘The Federation run by Servalan is bad news,’ said Korell.

‘Right,’ agreed Vila at once, ‘but the Federation run by some of the Councillors who displaced her could be even worse.’

‘Or better,’ Korell countered. ‘At this stage we don’t know. None of us has actually been at the heart of political affairs during the past six months.’

‘A Federation mixed up in a civil war could be the greatest opportunity of all,’ said Avon.

‘An opportunity for what? Murder, bloodshed, extermination?’ said Korell.

‘Isn’t that what goes on anyway?’ asked Avon. ‘We all of us have unfinished business with the sort of people who love power for power’s sake within the Federation.’

‘I’m not sure that I do,’ Korell argued.

‘You do more than anyone,’ said Avon.

Korell smiled at Avon. ‘And Vila. Do you have unfinished business with the Federation?’

‘I don’t know really. Do I Avon?’

‘I thought you were concerned about the death of Blake.’

Vila looked puzzled. ‘Of course I am. And we all know who killed Blake. You. Kerr Avon.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Sure? Avon, I was standing there. Three feet from you. You killed Blake. I saw the hole you made in his body. Now you’re not going to tell me that I imagined all that.’

‘No. Perhaps you are right.’ And with that Avon left the control room and returned to his cabin.

‘What’s all that about?’ Vila asked Korell, genuinely puzzled.

‘There can’t be many explanations,’ Korell told him. ‘Now we have to decide how to deal with our friends from the Federation. At the rate we are going we shall be docking in about forty-five minutes.’

As designs for space stations went, it was unexceptional, functional rather than luxurious. As locations for space stations go, it was bizarre in the extreme, circling a burned-out red giant with not even the remnants of a planetary system showing. The station, situated at a distance of fourteen light minutes from the star, travelled its elliptical orbit in splendid isolation. No space captain in his right mind would consider wandering near such a wreck of a sun, and its lack of planets would keep away everyone, from mining engineers to criminal exiles. The space station was as safe from detection as if it had been outside the Galaxy itself.

Inside the spinning station life was more predictable than outer appearances might have suggested. Federation guards stood at every corner; with black helmets, black uniforms, black hand rifles, black boots. Only the commanders were allowed to push their helmets up, revealing faces and personalities. This one, noticed Vila, played the game of friendship. Yet he had the same insanity deep down inside that all the Federation officers had instilled into them through their training; the ruthlessness that would allow them to destroy whole populations if their military strength was threatened in any way.

‘I am Chief Commander Rodin, in charge of operation D5. Kindly tell me who you are.’ He remained seated looking up at the three, making no attempt to invite them to sit. Nor did he seem worried by the convention that the psychological advantage is with the person looking down. He had little time for games.

Avon replied. 'I am Style, this is Jorma and Avalaan.' He pointed to Korell and Vila and spoke in a mild, unthreatening way. 'We have just completed a journey from Skat through the centre of the Galaxy...'

'Shut up,' barked the Chief Commander. 'What are you thinking of speaking in front of others? Give the code series, man.'

Avon looked confused and worried. 'That's just it. Something seems to have gone wrong. Everything was fine as we entered the hole...'

Rodin sprang to life. 'Guards, leave the room,' he shouted. 'No one is to enter without my personal command. Treble the guard on the door. Seal the base. Full alert.'

The guards rushed out, and the door slid shut after them. From beyond it the sound of running with orders being shouted could be heard reverberating down the corridors.

'Tell me what happened,' said Rodin finally, regaining his calmer attitude.

'We gathered material as required. Or at least I think we did because everything seems a bit vague now. Then we headed for the hole, and entered dead centre, applied reverse thrust, but it seemed to take too long. The vibrations built up and we all blacked out. We were still trying to sort out what had happened when you contacted us.'

'But is the cargo safe?'

'Cargo?' said Vila, to whom the question seemed aimed. 'Cargo?' he repeated.

Rodin pressed the console on his desk. 'Send in Stora,' he barked.

Stora turned out to be a fellow officer, dressed in full uniform. He stamped to attention. Something about him puzzled Avon; he averted his eyes. 'Stora, search the ship that has docked. Check the hold particularly.'

As Stora left Rodin turned back to the crew. His voice softened and his manner changed as he looked at Korell. 'Jorma, you say your name is. And what was your role on this mission? Or can't you remember that either?'

‘Pilot Sir,’ Korell replied formally.

‘Good.’ Rodin stood up. ‘And do you remember what you are doing, or what is going on? Do you even know who you are working for?’

All three looked innocent. Rodin swore, and punched a button on his desk violently enough for most desks to fall apart. ‘Come and get these three out of here!’ he shouted. The door opened and two guards came in. ‘Put them in the rest centre and let them try and sleep it off.’

As Avon, Korell and Vila were ushered out, Rodin sat back at his desk and pondered the matter. He was still thinking when Stora returned with his report. ‘The hold is empty but there are signs of raw sygnum everywhere. The ship has been converted in various ways, including having the extra shielding to allow it through the black hole and the autolog shows that they have been to Skat and through the hole.’

‘This is insanity,’ Rodin told him. ‘We’ve got so much security and secrecy around this operation that we don’t even know who is doing what and where. Which is all very well until a bunch of gooks like these three appear, claiming to have lost their memories. Since I don’t know if they should have been here or not I can’t tell if they are telling the truth. And I am strictly forbidden to ask for further information from command HQ.’

‘Couldn’t you circulate their pictures sir, see if anyone knows of them?’

‘Just as forbidden. No information goes out of here without authorisation from the highest of all levels. And I have specifically been told that information includes such things as questions. And if we detain them for months and then discover they are a crack troop of gravity-probe experts we’ll get court-martialed for not knowing them. Do you recognise any of them?’

‘One of them – the one called Style — reminds me of someone, but I can’t place it. It may be nothing.’

Rodin sighed. ‘What about their computer?’

‘Now that is strange, sir. I can’t get at it. It won’t tell me anything.’

‘New code word?’

‘Perhaps; or maybe it’s just jamming on everything.’

‘Could have resulted from the forces in the hole I suppose.’

‘Yes sir, except if that were so, how did they receive our command to identify themselves?’

Rodin stood up. ‘We shall just have to hold them until our Leader arrives and tells us what to do. Keep the ship guarded, keep them guarded; but keep them moderately comfortable, just in case they do turn out to be great heroes of the cause.’

‘Chief Commander.’ Stora saluted stiffly, turned and left the room.

Vila was impressed by the quarters they were allocated, by the food and drink they were given and for a moment even forgot his concerns about the plan of action Avon had led him on. Not that their surroundings could be called luxurious; but considering that most people whom Vila came across instantly threw him into prison, it seemed a reasonable approach. He made his point of view well known.

Avon for once was willing to let Vila chatter. The room was certainly bugged, and with the Commander uncertain as to who they were it was obvious that every word would be recorded. Eventually however, Vila got tired of talking to himself. He looked at Avon for direction. Avon concluded his detailed examination of the room and brought Vila’s attention to five points where the bugs were located. None of them, fortunately, was a visual link.

‘I don’t know about you two, but I am certainly going to rest. I feel like I’ve been battered from here to the other side of the Universe,’ announced Avon in the guise of his new persona. As he spoke he led Vila to the first bug, and mimed the removal of it gently. ‘So let’s keep it quiet,’ he said ambiguously, and delicately Vila applied his skills.

As the final device was removed Avon went to the bathroom and turned on the water supply. The others joined him. ‘There are bugs against the

main door located on the outside,' he said. 'The sound of the water should make it harder for them to hear. If they can hear nothing they'll just assume we've all gone to sleep.'

'What are we going to do?' Vila demanded through clenched teeth. 'We're in here, the ship is guarded, and sooner or later they are going to find out we are not on their side, whatever their side is. And if they can't find out they'll just hold us here.'

'I thought you welcomed the luxury,' Korell said.

'Not as much as I value my life,' Vila told her.

'Whatever they discover,' said Avon, returning to the subject in hand, 'they will find that we have been through the black hole. So even if they do find out we are not supposed to have been through, they will quickly work out that we know one hell of a lot, and that means we are worth keeping alive, to find out what we know and how we come to know it. As long as we are alive we stand a chance of finding out what is going on.'

'I don't like it,' said Vila.

'That hardly seems the point.'

'But we can't just sit here for days on end,' Vila objected.

'We're certainly not going to do that. Once you have opened the door out of here I suggest we go for a walk. Since nobody seems to know what is going on we ought to get away with it, and if we don't then we just say that memories started coming back and we wanted to check them out.'

As Avon had presumed from its shape and style, the station was built on standard lines, and he was easily able to work his way round without losing a sense of direction. The outer rim corridor curved gently beneath their feet as they passed silver door after silver door. The walls too were curved and packed with cables and trunking, back-up circuits, and every fifty yards there were helpful maps of the whole location. Certain areas, however, were significantly not named. After five minutes Avon led the way down an

interior corridor, and stopped outside an unmarked door. It looked the same as every other door to Vila, but he made no objection when Avon ordered it opened quickly. The lock was complex but the principle well known. It took less than a minute.

Avon entered carefully and looked around. As he had hoped, the room was empty. Korell and Vila followed rapidly and closed the door after them. Inside they found a square room measuring no more than twenty feet each way. One wall was totally taken up by a range of computer hardware, newly installed by the look of it and clearly fixed into a locked pattern. 'Watch the door,' Avon commanded before settling down in front of the main screen at the centre of the control panels.

Avon, as always, worked consistently and with a clear mind. Korell, as always, remained relaxed and calm. Vila, as always, was tense, fretful and about to panic.

At the computer Avon touched a number of keys and watched the displays respond, then touched more controls in response to the information he gathered. At one moment he called up an outline of the entire base on the screen, but after a few moments' study he returned to his questioning of the machine. Aware that every time he touched a control it would be recorded on the audit trail and eventually discovered, Avon kept the routine short and was completing the final run of questions when Vila's stage whisper told him someone was approaching. He ushered Vila behind the door and left Korell standing in the middle of the room. The door slid open and two uniformed guards came in. They looked at the beautiful lady facing them. She smiled; they hesitated. The hesitation was enough to enable even Vila the chance to render one of the guards unconscious with a sharp blow to the back of the neck. Avon dealt with the other.

'Take the guns,' Avon announced. 'I don't think we have too much time.'

'What did you find out?' demanded Vila as they left the computer room.

‘Vila, if I stand here and tell you now you won’t live long enough to make much use of the information. Move.’

‘Put like that,’ said Vila already on the run, ‘it seems a reasonable suggestion.’

As they moved back along the outer corridor Avon called up the ship, ordering preparation for immediate launch followed by maximum power away from the station. As Blake confirmed, Avon shut down transmission.

The group turned a corner. Ahead were two guards who looked up in surprise. Avon, Vila and Korell slid to a halt. All eyes seemed to focus on Avon. Slowly, so as not to cause any alarm, he moved his hand to his pocket and brought out a small box. It had two slight indentations on one surface. From his other pocket Avon removed a tiny phial. Delicately, watched all the time by the advancing but puzzled guards, he dropped two minute specks of liquid into the indentation.

‘Whatever you see,’ he said quickly to Korell and Vila, ‘ignore it. Keep heading for the ship.’

‘They were twenty feet across, crawling straight through the walls, with teeth ten feet high, covered in blue slime and smelling awful,’ said Vila. ‘It’s a good job I’m made of resilient stuff, otherwise I wouldn’t have made it.’

‘You aren’t and you didn’t,’ said Korell.

‘What?’

‘You are not made of resilient stuff and you didn’t make it. At least not on your own. After five seconds you collapsed on the ground whimpering like a two-year-old who’s been left by his mother. If I hadn’t picked you up and led you by the hand you’d still be there.’

‘Wonderful,’ said Vila. ‘You really know how to make me feel good. Still, you didn’t see those creatures. Twenty feet across...’

‘Thirty feet actually. What I saw were translucent, thirty feet across, like eight separate snakes coming out of one central body. They were able to kill anything just by wrapping one tentacle around the neck.’

‘But mine were...’

‘Shut up.’ It was Avon, concluding work at the computer. He turned to Korell. ‘According to the station console they have five unmarked freighters going between this time space and another. They travel out via Skat and eventually come back via the black hole. Whilst they are away they are stealing arms, plasma shielding, and a dozen other raw materials that can be used apparently to stage a very very large attack on the central institutions of the Federation.’

‘And by gathering everything outside this Universe they can do it all in absolute secrecy.’ Vila was pleased with himself at his deductions.

‘Certainly this scale of operation would cause a lot of comment if done on the door step of the Federation. But that is not the point.’

‘No?’ Vila was crestfallen.

‘No. It can’t be, can it?’ It was Korell who had realised the implications. ‘Blake told us that we would start to break up after we stayed too long on the other side.’

‘So?’ Vila still didn’t quite understand.

‘So Vila, by implication anything from the other side, like the guns and the shields and everything else they gather over there must eventually be quite unstable and useless in this universe.’

‘Maybe they haven’t realised yet.’

‘They must have because they have been doing this trafficking for months. There is only one reason why they should be bothering to bring back junk.’

‘To give it to the Federation?’ suggested Vila doubtfully.

‘For the people behind this operation, getting the sygnum and RT Alloy from the other side is only part one. Once here they are selling it on to Federation outposts as new supplies. In the shipments they’ll probably mix up some good weapons and materials with the decaying stuff. Now they have an advantage. Blake told us we would start to decay and the ship would start to break up in a matter of days. But according to the computer on the station the smaller the object, the slower it takes to break up. By the time the recipients of the weapons find out that some of them are not working it will be long past the time these people need. The Federation will be in turmoil, half the troops will be without proper weapons, and when things like that happen the first thing the Federation does is kill off some of its senior officials.’

‘So who is behind this?’

‘Not who, what.’

‘What?’

‘Orac.’ Avon spoke the name harshly.

‘Then that means Servalan.’

‘Quite probably.’

‘So Servalan wants an all-out attack on the Federation. A civil war.’

‘And what do we do about it?’

‘Go to the fifth sector.’

Vila and Korell looked blank.

Avon gave them more information. ‘To get as far out of the way as possible.’

And with that he strode from the room.

‘What is in the fifth sector?’ Vila asked Korell.

‘Stars, planets, comets, debris... You name it, it’s all there.’

‘OK. You’re not going to tell me either.’

‘Vila, if I knew what Avon was up to I might not tell you, but I would tell you that I knew.’

‘Very comforting. What are you going to do?’

‘Work it out.’ And Vila was left alone on the main deck.

The thief sat and pondered, gave up and went and got a drink. Carefully he poured a little onto KAT’s receptors.

‘What would you do in my position?’ he asked as the machine considered the latest concoction.

‘Add some Syrian 72 Sir,’ KAT replied.

‘I don’t mean that. I mean about Avon. And Korell. And this ship. I’m turning into a navvy. Doing odd jobs. Opening a couple of doors from time to time and that’s it. It was all right when there were seven of us. But now...’ He changed the topic of conversation. ‘Do you know that I really do have an alpha plus rating? That’s not just a story – it’s not a boast, you know.’

‘Sir, I know that. You were rated alpha plus from the age of three. You began to fake your questionnaires from the age of seven to avoid going into the Military Academy. When you got into the lower classes you found you could control those around you with your schemes, and get away with your petty thefts. So behaving stupid became a habit. But you then found that as a lower grade citizen you had few rights and fewer options in the workplace, and pushing truckloads of rubbish around the lower levels was not your idea of fun. So your thieving got more sophisticated and you learned to open locks. There are some that say you were the greatest thief of the whole second century.’

‘Do they? Really?’ Vila perked up a little. ‘But you’re right. I couldn’t get back. Acting became a way of life. Now I’m stuck with it.’

‘Does it worry you Sir?’

‘Sometimes. I mean sometimes I really do get afraid. Like really scared. I don’t have Avon’s hardness or Korell’s coolness. But being thought of as stupid is beginning to pale a little as a way of life. Especially as I seem to be doomed to spending the rest of my life with Avon.’

‘So how do you intend to make life better?’

‘By impressing Avon and Korell I suppose. Then they’ll treat me with more respect.’

‘Sir, you do have a problem.’

‘Do I?’

‘You don’t know what Avon is planning.’

‘That’s right. I have a problem. Avon. It’s always Avon.’

‘Then, Sir, solve the problem. Avon won’t expect you to know, so you will always be one jump ahead of him.’

Vila was suddenly wide awake. It appealed. And besides it wouldn’t be hard work. The computer would do it all. Vila turned to Blake. ‘I want you to solve a problem for me,’ he announced.

‘Define the problem,’ said Blake.

‘Avon is taking us into the fifth sector. He must have a plan, and I don’t know what the plan is.’

‘Why must he have a plan?’ asked Blake.

‘He always has a plan,’ Vila told him.

‘Very well. We assume he has a plan. Since the directional computers are locked onto a course which leads into the fifth sector we can also assume he is telling the truth. We can also assume that the ultimate destination lies somewhere along our current flight plan.’

‘Good: so what lies along that flight path in the fifth sector?’

‘Several thousand planets.’

Vila groaned. He knew it wouldn’t work.

He had a brain wave. ‘Do any of them have minerals or crystals or products that Avon might want to use to build teleport facilities?’

‘No,’ said Blake.

Vila forced his mind into something resembling action. ‘Are any of them likely locations of white holes?’

‘No,’ said Blake.

‘Well what else can it be?’

‘Sadly there is not enough background information on Avon in my data banks to answer that question.’

‘Why not?’ Vila was shocked. ‘You seem to know all about me. Why not about Avon?’

‘I have widely available data on a lot of Avon’s background. But he is habitually secretive, and that makes it much harder to work out what is on his mind. The only solution is for you to have a look at the list of planets and see if any strike you as being of interest to Avon.’

‘Two thousand you say? Well maybe, maybe tomorrow.’ Vila was losing enthusiasm fast.

‘Sir, do it now!’ KAT commanded. ‘You will be angry with yourself if you let yourself down again. Do it now. You have to stay on watch, and

there is nothing else to do. Blake, that esteemed custodian of the ship, Sir, will tell you if there is any danger. I will feed the list onto the screen at your position. When we have the answer then you can reward yourself with a drink, and at that stage perhaps I too may be permitted to partake of a little sustenance, Sir. Are you ready?’

Vila gave in. ‘Even the computers tell me what to do,’ he said.

Despite himself Vila worked his way through the list of grid references and planet names, along with alternative names, local names, official Federation names and slang names for precisely one hour forty-seven minutes and twenty-three seconds at which moment he stopped reading, looked up and stared blankly at the master screen in front of him for a further three minutes. Eventually he looked back at the list.

‘Not again.’ Vila looked at Blake. ‘He can’t, can he?’

‘He can do what he wants, unless you stop him.’ Blake announced calmly.

‘You lost him. No, I must be precise – that is a virtue. I should have said, “I presume you lost him”.’

There was silence.

‘I said, I presume you lost him. Am I right?’

Few people were able to speak to Servalan in that way and survive. Daareen was one of the few. Her mother had been a High Councillor who had backed Servalan in her bid for the Presidency and had suffered the inevitable loss of office that followed the defeat of Servalan’s forces. But she had retained many friends and was virtually the only ally that Servalan kept who was by and large indispensable. Now, finding it politically expedient to remain hidden from public gaze, she used her daughter as a proxy, and gave her free reign. The girl enjoyed the experience.

Servalan regarded Daareen impassively. She was in her late teens and showing much of what had been noted as her mother’s combination of great

beauty and rock hard resolve. Her cropped black hair matched Servalan's own. Indeed, beyond the confines of their own headquarters the similarities in the appearance of the pair were already being remarked upon. In one or two quarters it was suggested that their hair style combined with the flowing, revealing, highly decorated and totally impractical dresses was becoming the new fashion. If Servalan and Daareen recognised the effect they were starting to have on high fashion (and they most certainly did) they didn't acknowledge it. They tended to have slightly more important things on their hands.

'It was Kerr Avon, wasn't it, right inside operation headquarters?' said Daareen. She emphasised the past tense and retained only the pretence of the interrogative. It was really an accusation of failure, that highest of crimes.

Servalan gave up the act of silence and banged her hand on the table; but recovered and picked up the single blue rose on her desk, holding it to her face, affecting to smell the perfume. Eventually she put it back down slowly and looked up at her ally, attempting through her slowness and deliberation to regain the psychological advantage. 'He got away because our security system is designed to maintain the lowest of profiles and to keep information secure. We do not issue pictures of the criminals of the galaxy to all the guards.'

'Perhaps,' Daareen said, in an equally measured but emphatic voice, 'that is where you go wrong. Avon may be a criminal to the Federation but to us he could be immensely valuable. Do you realise how much information that man must have locked up in his head? Apart from being brilliant with computer hardware he has experience of stardrives working at above TD12, he has worked with at least two quite separate teleport systems, and from what I know of Avon he has probably worked out what makes them tick. And I hear he is starting to develop quite an ability in redesigning software too.'

Servalan stood and paced around the office. It had become more decorative than she would have liked – Daareen would never agree to stand whilst Servalan sat, so the room had a visitor's chair. It was that one extra chair that made Servalan feel the room was 'over decorated.' The chair interfered with her pacing, forcing a slight detour each time she marched across the golden floor. She looked at Daareen. Her pure black dress contrasted vividly with the pure white walls. 'Of course I know all that,' she exclaimed. 'But if you are suggesting that Avon would ever willingly agree to work with us you are mistaken.' Servalan looked exasperated. 'He trusts no one, not even his own crew. Besides we have Orac now, which, if I can remind you, is how we got the Skat project into full production.'

'Then why didn't Orac tell us about Avon?'

'One, because Avon is using some new device which generates non-tarriel random wave emissions, and two because he seems to be fascinated by this MIND myth. Avon is supposed to be the great logical thinker, but he is acting out of type following a myth, so even Orac has problems trying to work out what is going on. And third, Avon told Orac a lot of things but he rarely gave Orac reasons, and Orac never asked. Now all this may give credence to your view on his brilliance. And I know all the incredible things he has done.' She lingered on the word 'incredible' and spread her hands. 'But there are more important things in the Galaxy than Avon. He is human, and he is vulnerable, but he is still not our top priority. Becoming transfixed with Avon is not an error your mother would make.'

As the speech continued so Servalan's voice had become more mocking, pushing Daareen about as far as she could be pushed. The girl had more patience than Servalan, but inside she contained the same viciousness and pure brutality. Each knew the other would kill instantly. But for the moment each needed the other.

Daareen was persistent. 'Who were the two with him?'

‘One was Vila Restell. A good thief but otherwise harmless, useless and stupid. One of the originals – the least effective.’

‘And the other?’

‘A girl, Korell Maarn. One of my agents. She stays with Avon, watches, monitors, and when I’m ready she’ll come back and report.’

‘And you don’t doubt her integrity, letting Avon into the station?’

‘She didn’t know about this operation any more than Avon did. She helped us get Orac – I would think that is quite a recommendation for the time being, wouldn’t you?’

‘Very well.’ Daareen seemed appeased for the moment. ‘But one question remains. What will Avon do now?’

‘Spend time working on ways to use whatever information he found out here. From what was gathered when he reached the station he didn’t know much about what was going on, and his ship, although fast, showed no signs of any modifications beyond the drive and the defence mechanisms. He can’t take the information to the Federation since he would be recognised instantly and killed. And there’s not much he can do with the knowledge of how to use the reality distort on Skat – at least not much to our disadvantage.’

Daareen looked unimpressed. She walked across the room, and inserted the key into the translucent box of spinning lights on the table.

‘Orac, what do you deduce Avon will do now?’

‘It is obvious,’ the machine said. ‘As Servalan has pointed out already, he will try to use the information he has on your project for his own advantage.’

‘How will he do that?’

‘By extrapolating the logical sequence of events, and working out what you intend to do. That will lead him to the conclusion that you want to take over the Federation. Avon thrives on confusion. Where there is confusion in administration he can act best of all. He will work out a plan which will

come into operation as and when you attempt to take over control of the Galaxy.'

'What form will his plan take?'

'It will involve computer-based fraud. Vila's skills will enable Avon to steal any documents he needs and also open any locked computer entrances. His own skills are more than enough to pull off something very large. At least ten times bigger than his last attempt.'

'Which failed,' said Servalan.

'Because he relied on others. This time he relies only on Vila – who is ultimately expendable.'

To Daareen it seemed for a moment that Orac was ready to say more, but nothing further emerged. She took out the key. 'I wonder where he will make his base?' she said, but Servalan did not answer.

Vila's newly acquired information left him with a problem. Most of the knowledge he had gained in recent years had been either passed on to Avon, or in moments of crisis used immediately. But Vila knew that going to Avon's cabin and confronting him with the discovery would probably end up with little more than a closed door in his face. It would certainly not bring about a democratic vote – and even if it did he had no idea which way Korell would vote, nor that Avon would actually abide by any decision taken.

Vila returned to KAT, told him of the answer he had worked out and asked the computer for advice.

'Sir, I don't have the necessary background to give that information,' KAT told him, which as Vila replied, was not the sort of answer he was looking for.

'Then, Sir, I suggest you do nothing,' advised the machine. 'Avon's actions will either confirm or deny your assumptions. If you are proved to be right you may still have time to put your knowledge to good use, and if not, you will at least be well prepared if Avon chooses not to share his secret with his crew. Confronting him with the knowledge now will do no good.'

And since that was the conclusion that Vila had already reached he decided to go along with it. Together, man and machine chose a drink.

For three further days the ship continued its dull routine. Each of the crew took an eight hour watch followed by eight hours of research (or in the

case of Vila fun and games with KAT) and then eight hours sleep. It was not a routine that made for friendliness, conversation or jollity.

But eventually the routine was broken. The problem started with Blake.

‘I am sustaining interference,’ the computer announced.

‘What?’ asked Vila, on watch at the time.

Unhelpfully Blake repeated itself.

‘What sort of interference?’ demanded Vila.

‘My primary circuits controlling the directional computers are malfunctioning. Each time overrides are implemented the override itself is broken.’

‘You mean we are going off course?’

‘Not yet, but it could possibly happen. Meanwhile... The problem is spreading.’

Vila leaned across his control panel and pressed the intercom which worked throughout the whole ship.

‘Avon, I think you had better come here. Blake is having a heart attack.’

Instantly awake, Avon ran half the length of the ship to the control room, accused Vila of feeding adrenalin to the ship’s computers and demanded a report from the machine, before he even reached his position.

The computer remained silent. Avon looked at the bank of instrumentation that represented the ship’s functions. ‘Run back the log from just before you called me,’ he told Vila. Vila did it and Avon heard Blake’s last remarks. After that there was silence.

Avon pressed the intercom and called Korell to the control room. He broke contact before there was time for a reply.

‘We appear to have full functions as long as we operate manually,’ Korell told him when she arrived. ‘But with the auto-repair circuits out it’s going to be a long job to sort out the faults.’ Avon moved across to the computer console and started to remove plates of controls, chips, and circuits. He was stopped by Korell. ‘We’re moving off course,’ she said.

‘Then put us back on course. You’re the pilot.’

Korell ignored the comment. ‘There’s a planetary system about twenty light years away. We seem to be slowing down and bearing away to it.’

‘Compensate,’ ordered Avon. ‘Put us back on the right course, and stay with it. Call me if there is a fraction of deviation. Vila, start removing the alpha sections of the master computer.’ And with that Avon crawled under the main panel at the front of the system and started removing plates of circuitry. As he did so a background noise appeared to come from Blake. Vila let slip the plate he was removing. ‘Dropping delicate computer equipment is not the best way to repair it,’ said Avon.

‘I couldn’t help it,’ Vila complained. ‘It was hot.’

Disbelieving, Avon touched the plate, and removed his hand quickly. He turned to the main bank of instrumentation and touched it gingerly. That too was overheating. Meanwhile the background sound was getting louder, and definitely coming from Blake.

‘Are we still on course?’

Korell confirmed.

‘Then start shutting down all non-essential functions to get rid of that noise.’

As Korell obeyed the sound increased. ‘It’s music,’ Vila announced. ‘It’s Blake playing music.’

‘Not like I’ve ever heard,’ said Korell. She sat back in her chair, listening intently.

Avon turned to her angrily. ‘You are supposed to be turning the systems off, not listening to the background.’

Korell regained her concentration. ‘Still on course. All the circuits are responding.’

‘Good. Now keep shutting down and try and remove that noise from Blake.’

But Korell's hands hardly moved toward the console. Vila too had stopped moving. Avon called instructions above the sounds but the others seemed not to hear. He repeated his commands. Korell heard him but refrained from continuing the shut down. She sat, eyes wide staring impassively straight ahead. The sound seemed to be telling her something. It was nothing specific, but instead something symbolic, about way of life, about people, about how to live. For a moment she wanted to say she had more important things on her mind than symbolic theorising and sociological speculation, but the sounds were insistent. It was as if they were able to make a direct line for centres of meaning deep within her brain. She saw images that were not images at all, pictures with no form, stories telling her that life didn't have to be like this, that everything could be different as long as she listened. It was as if she was being invited to look beyond the horizon, over the edge of the planet, over the edge of the galaxy, perhaps even beyond the very edge of the universe itself into something beyond the curve of existence, beyond reality itself...

Avon watched what had happened to his crew. He tried to pull himself across the floor of the ship, but the sounds were insistent. Korell was right. It was music like he had never heard before, reminding him of things past. Of his family... Even KAT became absorbed. The small computer began to follow the lead of his larger brother. The two computers began to play together. As the sound built up Korell sat impassively watching the controls, until she eventually understood. The music needed resolving. There was more, and only if she heard more would she fully understand. She made minor adjustments to the controls; *Revenge* slowed and started moving off course. On the screens, fully operational but unseen by the crew, a star grew larger. It passed from the centre of the screens and a small dot grew into a blue-green planet covered in cloud. On the ship only one entity remained free of the influence. Avon sensed it. 'Avon,' whispered KAT. 'Do not be misled. The influence is on the planet, Sir. It works through the

tarriel cells, not direct into your nervous system. MIND goes straight to the neural links, and this isn't MIND.' But Avon's consciousness had gone, buried behind the all-pervading noise rising now to a vast climax as *Revenge* was brought into land, in a small space port in the northern hemisphere of a planet not even marked on the ship's computer-updated star charts.

The room was quite remarkable. Avon might even have considered it beautiful had he bothered to cultivate a sense of aesthetics. There were long wooden tables probably carved by hand, exquisite high-backed chairs, and tall pure blue candles burning brightly on all sides. Above there was a balcony that those born on Earth a thousand years before might have recognised as a minstrels' gallery. That Avon saw it merely as a means of possible escape was neither here nor there to his captors.

Gaining consciousness Avon rapidly tested his options for movement – arms, hands, legs, head, and discovered himself not to be held in place by any restraints. Moving cautiously he found he could put the weight on his legs. He raised himself – just far enough to acknowledge that there were no hidden force shields. He logged the information for future use.

To his left was Vila, sleeping peacefully. To his right Korell, at the same stage as Avon in assessing the current situation.

Across the table sat three well dressed and apparently unarmed gentlemen. They were busy discussing matters in low voices, paying scant attention to their prisoners. Avon turned his head to check the exit routes. Still no restraints. To his right a range of windows looked onto a massive lawn. It was impossible to tell if they were plain glass or reinforced in some way. Straight ahead a door slightly ajar led into what appeared to be a corridor. To his left another door, wide open, leading into a lobby. Behind him a door was almost shut. He seemed spoilt for choice.

One of the three captors opposite noticed his movements; the low conversation stopped. The table was touched and monitors appeared, rising from the surface and yet leaving the wooden appearance apparently unbroken.

‘Welcome to Ghammar,’ announced the one sitting opposite Avon. ‘Under the constitution of the fifth regency I have to inform you that you are free to go at any time. However, allow me to try to prevail upon you to stay of your own free will. We would welcome the chance to discuss matters with you. Will you tell us your names?’

‘Before I tell you anything will you tell us who you are and how you got us here?’

‘The suspicious nature of a Terran,’ replied the Ghammaran. ‘But without the mindless threats that are bred within the Federation.’

‘There is no point threatening what you do not know,’ said Avon tersely.

‘A logical position to take. We are three members of the Council of Representatives of the island of Shara occupying our position by the grace of the prince Ghasri of Xlendi, in the northern hemisphere of the planet Ghammar. I would tell you our names but you will find them unpronounceable. Local culture dictates that if you wish to be polite you will call us ‘Representatives’. If you do not wish to be polite you need not.’ Avon noticed the almost musical quality that existed in the voice of the Ghammaran. It gave him his first recollection of what he had just experienced on *Revenge*.

The voice continued as if following Avon’s own thought patterns. ‘We brought you here through simple hypnosis. Your race chooses to distinguish between hypnotic sounds and non-hypnotic by calling the former "music". It is an old technique – one that your peoples had a thousand years ago but then outlawed for fear of the power it brought. You piloted your craft into land yourselves.’

‘Why have you brought us here?’ asked Korell.

‘To learn more of you, to offer to show you our way of life, to exchange technologies...’

‘This all sounds very generous of you.’

‘Not at all. Experience over the years has proven that merely inviting people of your race here is a waste of time. They either do not come at all or come so heavily armed that war is inevitable. So now we make the invitation a little more real, a little more personal. Simply, the logic of your situation suggests that firstly you should verify your position, by leaving; then you should return because there is every chance that an exchange of views and knowledge could benefit you. Take a look at our society, our civilisation, our culture. You will find we have some things to offer you, but at heart we are a simple rural people.’

‘Forgive me if I seem ungrateful or ungenerous,’ said Korell, ‘but that is not the logical situation. If we attempt to leave and put our ship in orbit you can always bring us back. We will not learn of the validity of your claim until we take the ship totally out of orbit and away from the influence of your music. And besides, rural environments can be dangerous.’ She looked at Avon.

‘A wise analysis,’ replied the Representative. ‘You have the choice to make.’

A sound came from Avon’s right. Vila had woken up, and caught the gist of the conversation. ‘Let’s leave.’

‘No.’ Avon was emphatic. ‘At least let us ask a few more questions of our hosts.’ He turned back to those sitting opposite. ‘Do you have space travel?’

‘A good first question. Yes, we do. But we do not use it as you do to fly across the Galaxy. We have no Empire. Even our own planet is divided into many states, each independent of the others. We travel only to secure raw materials and basic food supplies from uninhabited or sparsely inhabited planets in the vicinity of Ghammar.’

‘Do you have teleport?’

‘No. But if you have, then we could start our exchange of technologies.’

‘We do not have teleport on our current ship, and we need certain raw materials to build the system. Do you have ships capable of making voyages over several hundred light years rapidly?’

‘Yes, we have that technology. You may also like to note that we have an anti-gravity field that links with your own type of fusion reactors as used in the ramjets of your space craft.’

‘Is that good?’ whispered Vila.

‘The speed generated by the ramjets is determined by the amount of interstellar matter that can be picked up as the ship travels in deep space. That matter is used to feed the fusion engines. So there is a finite limit to how fast a ramjet fusion engine can go – time distort 12 is about the maximum. *Liberator* could go much faster, but we never had a good enough engineer on board to work out how they did it. But an anti-gravity device could push the limits up considerably.’ Avon, warming to his theme through his explanation to Vila, turned back to the Ghammarans. ‘We could do a deal. You secure the materials and we build the system.’

‘Avon...’ Vila whispered urgently. Avon chose to ignore him.

‘I shall prepare you a list of materials we need – there is not much – and then direct the building of two systems, one for our ship and one for you. In the meantime, we shall return to our ship.’

‘A rapid deal, well arranged,’ said the Representative. ‘My colleagues here will show you the way.’

The way shown was out through the left hand door, into the lobby, down three stone steps and through a magnificent old wooden door out into the cool evening air under a bright orange sun. They walked along a gravel path, with the large stone building on one side and hedges and bushes obscuring the view of the other. The edge of the building was reached, the corner turned, and *Revenge* was standing on a large concrete apron. A

buggy took the crew across to the ship. They boarded, Korell thanked the buggy driver and closed the airlock doors.

‘Straight up, no orbit,’ said Avon as they reached the control room.

‘Blake, I want a silent replay of the events leading to our landing on the planet. Re-run from the moment there was the first interference.’

On the screens reappeared the patterns of stars as the ship approached its present location. The action was eerie in its silence, the voices of the crew, like the music, unheard. The replay told Avon little but that the ship was clearly guided down by Korell, presumably under the influence of the sounds that had affected all three of them. ‘Report on the nature of the interference.’

‘I don’t know what it was.’ said Blake.

‘The machine is correct,’ said Korell, checking her own data. ‘The interference got at the computer as well as at us. In fact it looks from this data as if the interference actually came via the computers.’

‘Madam, if I may disagree, not all the computers.’ Everyone turned. It was the voice of KAT.

‘Since when did you start giving advice that wasn’t asked for?’ said Vila.

‘Since the moment my abilities started to be maligned, Sir. The interference you speak of was a simple radion transmission picked up and amplified through tarriel cells. Any computer, including the ship’s master computer which you refer to as Blake is bound to be affected. I did try to counter it with a wave emission of my own but we were too close to the source by then.’

‘And you are not affected by the sound,’ said Korell, joyfully accepting the irony of the situation, ‘because you are not based on the tarriel cell. And Avon knew all the time. That explains a lot.’

‘Not to me it doesn’t,’ said Vila.

‘Korell is absolutely correct, Sir. Which is why, I presume, you so rarely consult my data banks. Not that that is a concern of mine, since it leaves me free to consider wider aspects of some of the finer substances invented by mankind. But on this occasion...’

‘On this occasion you felt the need to point the error out,’ said Korell. ‘And if you felt that this was the time to point something out it follows you have something else worth pointing out, that reveals your inestimable value. Fire away.’

‘Madam, you have the advantage of me,’ replied KAT with an air of humoured indignation.

‘Give us your replay of the interference,’ said Avon.

KAT’s replay included sound, and was projected through Blake onto the ship’s main screens. In itself it told the crew little, although Korell noted that Avon had deliberately not consulted KAT immediately, even though he probably already knew about the tarriel cell link with the sounds from Ghammar. The only other point of interest was that the replay also showed that Avon still retained an interest in that strange something called MIND. Avon certainly seemed to be trying to argue with KAT about it as he lurched in and out of consciousness before the ship landed. Korell looked for an explanation.

Avon, however, chose to be evasive. ‘It may exist,’ he said, ‘but here and now it is nothing of importance. And certainly nothing to do with this affair.’

Korell on the other hand chose the moment to develop her enquiries. She addressed herself to KAT.

‘Explain the use of the word “MIND” in Avon’s comments during the interference,’ she said, precise as ever.

‘MIND is reputed to be an entity. Madam, there have been rumours for several years that someone or something exists which is touching on human affairs, and in some way controlling them. MIND is a legend, but a legend

with a difference. There are two normal types of legend. First legends which come from events long long past, such as the legend of Hister who attempted to destroy the Earth a thousand years ago. Then there are legends based on a degree of truth surrounding recent events, such as the legend of Blake's 7 which is now spread throughout the Galaxy. It is based roughly on truth but there are certain differences in important matters. For example...'

'All right KAT,' said Avon. 'I think we have a fair idea of what the Blake's 7 legend is all about.'

'But MIND is different, Sir. MIND is said to exist now, although no one knows what it is. And yet people believe it exerts a presence, an influence.'

'I never took you for the suspicious type,' said Korell, 'But I can see why you consult KAT on the subject. If MIND does exist then it exists separately from the omnipotent tarriel cell. Which means it is free from interference by Orac. This begins to explain things.'

Avon remained silent; KAT answered for him. 'Sir, if I may speak? Madam, Avon feels that MIND has been attempting to influence him – communicate with him – for some time.'

Korell reviewed the facts. 'MIND is supposed to be some sort of highly logical being taking an active part in human affairs, right?' There was no reply. 'So why do you feel it is getting at you?'

Avon became irritated but he refrained from taking further refuge in silence. 'Events have taken place during the last few years which I have sought to understand. I have examined all possibilities, including the existence of the legend of MIND. I do not believe that MIND is purely influencing me, any more than I believe that MIND is some sort of pure energy force of intellect floating around the Galaxy, which is what the popular belief says. Matters remain to be explained. From time to time I look for an explanation.'

Korell was by now totally fascinated, and would not let go of the subject. 'KAT, give me a run-down of episodes in Avon's recent life which may be put down to the influence of MIND.'

'No,' shouted Avon. 'This is a pointless waste of time, when we have to decide what to do about Ghammar.'

'Are you afraid of something?' suggested Vila, hoping at last to have found some sort of chink in Avon's seemingly impenetrable armour.

'I am simply telling you that there is more important business at the present. KAT is needed now to solve the problem of Ghammar, because if the Ghammarans attack again KAT is the only computer we have which can withstand the attack. If you start taking up our time debating why I happened to say one word during the last attack we might as well surrender now.'

'Very well,' said Korell. 'Let's put MIND in abeyance for the moment. What do you plan to do about Ghammar?'

'There is nothing to do about Ghammar,' said Vila. 'For once we have found a race of people who actually do not want to harm us. They don't have teleport, Avon knows how to build one, and they'll get the raw materials. Avon does the design work and we all get what we want, including a freighter that can go as fast as *Liberator*. What's wrong with that?'

'Nothing,' said Avon, 'if it is true. But what if this is just another happy band of people working for the Federation –or working for Servalan? Servalan already has Orac and Caro – which makes for a large amount of computing power, even in the hands of a technological illiterate like Servalan. With teleport as well there is nothing she could not achieve.'

'I thought you said there was already nothing she couldn't get with access to the alternative universe through Skat?' said Vila.

Avon was emphatic. 'That knowledge gives her great power and a neat trick – a way of countering the Federation without having to match it with

physical power, which she'll never do. But with the situation developing as it is the end will be messy. At some stage she will have to attack the Administration on Earth whilst still attacking the Command HQ of the Federation, and that will be her time of greatest weakness. It will also be the Federation's time of greatest weakness and our opportunity. But if she gets the teleport...'

'So why did you offer it to them if you think they are Servalan's men?'

'Because for a prize that big they will take risks. And they have risked letting us get back on the ship.' Avon turned his attention to the small box. 'What defence can there be against another attack from the sound waves from Ghammar?'

KAT was clear. 'Sir, there is but one solution. As soon as the emissions from the planet begin, I can put out a counter pulse which will neutralise the sounds. Sir, they will render them harmless. Unpleasant but harmless, Sir.'

Vila was unable to restrain his delight that a machine he had discovered had proved to be so valuable. His only concern was that Avon seemed to be getting more 'Sirs' out of KAT than he was.

'Sir, I fear that I must add however that there is one condition. I feel, Sir, that such heroic work, and if I may say, such demanding and unpleasant work as this, requires a little reward. Vila, Sir, you play with me – try out a little of this, a little of that. It is a load I have to bear, Sir for that is my function. But it is now so long, Sir, since I had a chance to partake of a little para-hyrene. The kind Avon gave me a little at the space station...'

'Avon gave it to you at the station?'

'It mixed well with the A and S.'

'A and S?' queried Vila. He feigned ignorance.

'Adrenalin and Soma,' Korell patiently reminded him.

'Ah yes. I think I may have inadvertently given some to KAT once. Never touch it myself.'

‘Sirs, Madam, may I suggest para-hyrene plus a little adrenalin and soma would be suitable reward for such tasks as you now require me, a poor humble kinesthetic analysis and transmission machine, to perform?’

‘Vila!’ said Korell with mock anger, ‘you are harbouring a computer that is drug dependent. If it had ever happened before it would be a crime by now.’

‘It wasn’t me! Avon gave it to KAT.’

‘Correction,’ said Avon. ‘I gave it to KAT once on leaving the space station. You gave it to KAT once before, as we approached Skat. Remember the wall?’

‘KAT’s projection?’ asked Vila meekly. He had been scared witless by the mental projections of a computer, and not just once but twice.

Avon turned to KAT. ‘Very well,’ he announced. ‘But you only get the reward after we are safely away from Ghammar. If you touch the stuff before then there’s no telling what sort of counter wave you’ll put out. Korell, lock up every drop of adrenalin, soma and para-hyrene you can find on the ship. I don’t want Vila consuming our chances of survival. No wait, Vila’s the thief – he’ll only steal it. Give it to me for safe keeping. KAT, I will hand it over when your tasks are successfully completed.’

‘Sir, you are most gracious,’ KAT told him. Avon smiled broadly.

Returning to establish a distant orbit from the planet, Avon gave orders to the Ghammarans for the raw materials he required for teleport construction. The details were received without comment other than an assurance that work would proceed forthwith. Avon then set the ship’s computers upon a variety of tasks without a word to Korell or Vila, leaving each of them once again to their own devices. Eventually it grew too much for Vila and he wandered disconsolately down to Avon’s cabin.

Avon looked at the thief with disdain. ‘Vila,’ he declared, ‘this is not the time for idle chatter.’

‘It may not be for you, but it is for me. You deprive me of everything I need for medicinal purposes, I can’t talk to KAT because it is on full alert, you’ve turned most of Blake off line because of Ghammeran interference, Korell won’t speak because she’s too busy trying to analyse logically what makes you tick – and she has to do it without a computer, and I still don’t know what is going on. If the Ghammarans come up with the goods then what? Do we go back down, do we direct them from here?’

‘Would it make much difference to you. Vila. whatever I told you?’

‘It might. I might refuse to co-operate if I didn’t like the scheme. I could leave the ship... I don’t like being pushed around by you, Avon.’

‘It would be bizarre if you did. Just keep out of my way until those people down there get back to us with a report.’

It looked for a moment as if Vila was going to continue the argument, but he felt dejected and uninspired and finally welcomed the interruption caused by the communication channel springing to life. One of the Representatives of the Ghammarans announced simply on all screens that all materials had been gathered and work was now ready to begin.

Avon appeared relaxed, acknowledging the call and stating that he would be ready in one hour with instructions. He then ran at full speed to the flight deck, touched a dozen controls to bring Blake back on line and commanded a full report from the machine. A long series of numbers appeared on the main screen which Avon studied intently. To Vila they meant nothing; to Korell their importance became rapidly apparent. As the number sequence ended Avon turned and noticed Korell. ‘That should make interesting reading for you,’ he said.

‘It’s the locations of the various items that you listed as essential for the building of the teleport. Half of them at least are not the slightest bit necessary. Why did you send them on a wild goose chase?’

‘To find out where they got the items.’

‘But you knew exactly where they were available.’

‘And so did they. At least they found out very quickly. And in some cases they went straight to Federation strongholds, removed substantial amounts of infinitely valuable materials and brought them back here. How did they know where to go? How did they manage to find what they wanted so quickly? How is it that there are no panic buttons being pushed on every single Federation planet within a hundred light years of here?’

‘I presume,’ said Korell coolly, ‘that those are rhetorical questions.’

‘They are in as much as I know the possible answers. One is that they are allies of the Federation. Another is that they do have powers far beyond what we have yet imagined –powers to subdue whole planets with their sound waves for example, without the authorities knowing that anything untoward is happening. Or last, someone tipped off the Federation what was happening and the order was given to let the Ghammarans have their bits and pieces. Now which one is it?’

‘What wonderful logical imponderables you do set up,’ Korell replied. ‘You have no way of knowing as things stand, since you have two suspects and neither can verify or deny anything since you distrust both suspects. You daren’t tell the Ghammarans how to build the teleport because you still don’t trust them. You are also unsure of me, and yet if you decide I am the traitor you are still not sure if the Ghammarans can be trusted, even if they are not working for the Federation.’ She laughed out loud. ‘This is the best yet. Avon, what are you going to do?’

Avon turned and let out a smile. Vila saw it, and leapt to the ground. Both Avon and Korell turned to him in amazement. After a few seconds Vila raised his head slightly and looked up. Seeing that he was not threatened he rather sheepishly got to his feet. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘It’s that smile of yours, Avon. Last time I saw you look that way you had just shot Blake. I thought it was going to start again.’

‘You can relax,’ Avon told him. ‘What Korell says is true. She could be a spy in our midst, the Ghammarans could have great powers, or they could

be working for the Federation.'

'So what will you do?'

'On Korell, I reserve judgement.'

'Thank you Avon,' she replied mockingly. 'Most magnanimous.'

'As for the Ghammarans, I think there should be a modification in procedure.' He punched the controls in front of his position and the leading Representative of the Ghammarans came on the screen. 'There has to be a slight change of plan,' Avon said. 'I shall build the teleport here on *Revenge*.'

There were no objections from below. 'Send up a ship,' Avon continued, 'with all the materials on board. It can dock with us and we shall transfer everything into the hold.'

The Ghammaran agreed instantly and happily. Shortly, a ship took off from the surface carrying the materials. Docking and off-loading went without a hitch and Avon was left to work on the teleport project. If the Ghammarans harboured any concern about Avon's change of plan they showed not the slightest sign.

Once more with time on his hands Vila conversed with the now liberated Blake. The computer's view was that the lack of concern from the planet below was not surprising. They could have no knowledge that KAT was able to counteract their operations and so would feel safe to let Avon continue his work. 'But,' added Blake, 'there is one thing you should know. With the equipment Avon has and the knowledge he has of teleport, which although virtually unparalleled is none the less limited, it will take him around four and a half years to construct even a working model. Then assuming that no faults are discovered in the model system it will take a further three years to develop a full scale operating teleport.'

Long before Blake's convoluted sentence had ended Vila had spat his drink out in surprise.

'Do the Ghammarans know this?'

‘Probably.’

‘And...’

‘And they are prepared to wait. If they do believe they have the *Revenge* and its crew captured then they have all the time in the world. They can leave us up here, forget about us if need be and carry on with their normal day to day activity.’

‘Is Avon really building a teleport then?’

‘Yes. But that does not appear to be his main priority.’

‘What is he building then?’

‘That I cannot determine. But between us we could solve the problem, Vila.’

There was a change in the machine’s voice that made Vila uneasy as Blake continued. ‘Simply go into the hold where he is working and observe. Then come back and let me know what is going on. I will then deduce the solution.’

Reluctantly Vila agreed. He started making his way through the narrow corridors of the ship towards the hold when a sudden thought struck him. He touched an intercom pad on the wall. ‘Blake, there are computer monitors throughout the ship. Why don’t you monitor Avon yourself?’

‘Avon has turned the monitors in the hold off to stop me observing. He is becoming dangerously secretive. I must know what is going on. For the safety of the ship, Vila.’

Vila let go the pad and walked on towards the hold. The main door refused to open to his touch command. He banged on it and shouted for Avon.

An opening appeared just wide enough to let Vila enter. All around him was electrical circuitry, computer panels and silicon wiring. It was difficult for Vila to make any sense of the mess: virtually the whole floor was covered.

Avon looked at Vila impassively. ‘Yes?’ he asked.

‘Er, I just came down to make sure you were all right.’

‘Very kind Vila, yes I am.’

‘Good. Nothing I can do for you?’

‘Yes.’

‘What?’

‘Go away.’

Vila did as he was told, taking a final look round but knowing it was going to be impossible to give a true impression of what the room was like. It had also struck him that the deal with KAT meant he was going to have to go without access to the finer liquids of life for seven years.

Blake however was able to make more of it than Vila had guessed. As Vila described the mess and confusion the machine disengaged other functions, analysing the information and comparing it with existing data. At the conclusion it gave a courteous ‘Thank you Vila,’ before apparently shutting down. Vila however was not so easily appeased. He demanded an answer. After a moment the machine condescended to reply. ‘Avon is up to something Vila, but I need time to consider his actions, and the materials he is using. I will report back to you as soon as I possibly can.’

Vila awoke with a start. KAT was talking to him. He thought about that for a moment. The machine's behaviour seemed to be getting more and more odd each day. He shook his head in an attempt to clear it. KAT was still speaking; Vila decided to listen. The machine was chattering about directions. That seemed odd too. Vila took a leap into the unknown and opened his eyes. It didn't take long – at least not very long – to realise that something was wrong. Lights were flashing on Blake's console that should never have been flashing, unless they were in low orbit about to land. But they weren't. They were in high orbit. Vila checked the data on the screens in front of him and swallowed hard. They were about to land.

'Blake, abort landing. Take us into orbit again,' he shouted.

'No,' replied Blake unexpectedly. 'We must land.'

'What do you mean, no? Take us into orbit,' commanded Vila.

'Avon is building a machine that will destroy this ship, and trick you,' said Blake. 'We must go to the Ghammarans for help.'

For once Vila acted with a certain degree of efficiency. He pressed the ship's intercom and called Korell and Avon to the main control room. Then he turned to KAT. 'Can you override Blake?' he asked.

'Sir, I can, and indeed Sir I shall be delighted to have the opportunity,' said KAT, 'but I regret Sir, that I cannot fly the ship. That is why Sir, I sought to wake you.'

Korell and Avon emerged into the control room at full speed.

'Korell take the controls,' Vila shouted. 'KAT take over from Blake.'

The surprise on Korell's face at being given firm orders from Vila barely had time to register before there was a sharp jolt as KAT relieved Blake of its responsibilities. Carefully she eased the ship back through the atmosphere. As she did so Blake began transmitting sounds of a type they could all remember.

'KAT, block out the sound,' called Avon with hands firmly planted on ears.

Within an instant Blake was silent, and the ship continued its climb. 'When you get up there head into deep space, reference 99 37 81. No orbit, just keep going.'

For a while there was no conversation. Blake had relinquished all controls of the ship, including life support. KAT worked overtime reinstituting fail-safe procedures that the master computer had disengaged. All airlocks were sealed and much of *Revenge* depressurised, but the ship was maintained in working order. Avon made adjustments to Blake to bring back in basic controls whilst keeping higher functions off line. As the crisis lessened, Avon turned on Vila. 'And what the hell were you up to during all that?' he shouted. Vila was taken aback. He felt he needed praise not criticism for rescuing the ship, and feigned ignorance of any guilt.

Avon spoke rapidly and quietly. 'Vila, you were left on watch, two and a half hours ago. Then suddenly Korell and I are called in to find the ship about to land and the only apparent solution to the crisis being to shut down the master computer. I would have thought that even you would recognise the need for some sort of explanation.'

Vila admitted guilt only in terms of a brief snooze. 'When I woke up Blake had gone crazy. It said it was taking us in to land because you were endangering the ship.'

'And I suppose you took it upon yourself to tell that broken down heap you call Blake what was going on in the hold. Didn't it strike you as worth

noting that I had shut down all the links between the computer and the lower regions of the ship?’

‘All right, all right Avon. Why don’t you just tell me what you are up to instead of playing games all the time? Hasn’t it ever struck you that by letting me know a few more things we might end up in fewer jams?’

‘If I thought it safe to tell you I would,’ said Avon.

‘Vila’s got a point though,’ said Korell. ‘If he had had more information from you he would have been less likely to believe whatever lies Blake was making up.’

Avon calmed down slightly and asked for a report on Blake’s actions. Vila gave a quick run down, causing Korell to frown.

‘That makes little sense Avon,’ she said. ‘Unless Blake was passing all the information back to Ghammar and awaiting instructions. That would mean that the Ghammarans were letting you get on with the work whilst interfering with Blake. But why? They knew that as soon as you got firm evidence of their treachery you would refuse to work for them.’

‘None of this makes any sense,’ Vila said sadly. It seemed to be his reflection upon the whole human race, and most alien races too.

‘No sense at all,’ said Korell, ‘unless you assume that Avon wasn’t building a teleport after all.’

Vila’s eyes brightened. ‘That’s right Avon. Blake said that it would take seven years to build a teleport. I can’t see you happily working on your own for seven years.’

‘Well now, you’ve both worked it out so well this far, are you going to tell me what I was doing?’ There was no smile on Avon’s face. He was tiring of the game, but still unwilling to disclose any more bits of information.

‘It could have something to do with Terminal.’

Avon was for once impressed. He turned to Vila in complete surprise.

‘I checked out the list of places we were heading for before the Ghammarans got in the way. The only one that I recognised was Terminal. But why you want to go there is beyond me.’

‘Is anyone going to let me in on the secret?’ asked Korell.

Vila gave a rapid explanation. ‘Avon took us there on one of his previous wild goose chases. It was while we were on *Liberator*, and he wouldn’t tell us what he was up to then either, just kept taking the ship towards the planet, even to the extent of flying straight through a cloud of space liquid which totally destroyed the ship. He thought he was chasing Roj Blake, but it was just a trap by Servalan. She caught us, the ship was destroyed and it was only a brilliant move at the last moment by me that saved Orac.’

‘So is it Terminal again?’

‘Yes.’

‘What was the reason that you went there last time?’

‘To find Blake, as Vila said.’

‘But that never made sense,’ said Vila. ‘The chances of Blake really being there and sending the messages about having found some vast store of wealth was so unlikely it couldn’t be true. And it doesn’t make sense for the man who always claims to be so logical and clear in his actions.’

‘So my guess,’ said Korell, ‘is that yet again it has something to do with MIND. Your continual return to it is walking proof MIND exists. You are suffering from machine induced neural deviance.’

There was a tense pause. Avon stood up and paced up and down the flight deck. Neither Vila nor Korell risked speaking for fear of deflecting Avon from an explanation. Eventually they got it.

‘I took *Liberator* to Terminal because of the message that seemed to come from Blake. But I also held the suspicion that MIND was involved. And having discovered Terminal was involved I could see a possible use for the planet. Now the question of MIND does not arise any more, but I can still see a use for Terminal.’

‘How do we know that MIND is not involved?’ asked Korell.

‘Because MIND is a myth, just like Blake’s 7. If you listen to people. on the fringes of the Federation, or the common herd in down and out Federation colonies you’ll hear stories of the gallant Roj Blake and his merry men, dedicated to freeing the inner and outer worlds from slavery, working for each other selflessly, killing only when necessary. But the truth was totally different. There was virtually no agreement about anything on *Liberator*, and Blake rapidly turned into a homicidal maniac willing to kill a hundred million people that he would call innocent. The same is true of MIND. The things MIND is supposed to have done are prolific. I investigated MIND fully on *Liberator*, and got Orac to check out hundreds of supposed actions of MIND. Anything that could relieve the tedium of life with Vila and Tarrant was worth looking at. But Orac found just a jumble of half stories and quarter truths. There is no MIND.’

‘But amid all those half stories there were still enough to keep you looking,’ said Korell. ‘There was always the unexplained event, the possibility that even if the common herd were making up stories about MIND in order to give greater excitement to their mundane lives, somewhere something like MIND did exist. So you kept looking. So it is no good you now saying that the messages that you got which took you to Terminal the first time didn’t come from MIND. If you followed a story that far it must have been more than one of the pathetic inventions from a Federation colony.’

‘But it was a trick of Servalan’s,’ Vila told Korell. ‘Avon fell for it and we lost everything.’

‘Well now,’ said Avon, characteristically turning and looking straight at Vila, ‘you would have seen through it all I suppose.’

‘I saved Orac,’ said Vila defensively.

‘But now you want us to go back to Terminal?’ asked Korell. ‘And you are saying it still has nothing at all to do with MIND. So what is so special

about Terminal that you want to go back?’

But Avon had tired of the inquisition. ‘Blake has enough capability back on line to give you a run down of that. Why don’t you ask?’ And with that Avon retired once more to the hold. As he did Vila touched two controls but nothing happened. Blake still had no access to that part of the ship.

No matter what Korell had learned from Blake on the subject of Terminal, nothing really prepared her for the vision that presented itself on the screen as the ship moved into the fifth sector. The planet was grotesquely elongated rather than rounded. ‘It was man made?’ she asked Vila as she watched the object on the screen. Vila nodded glumly. He knew what was down there. ‘So why did they build it in that shape?’

‘Avon said they should go back to the drawing board when he was down there last time,’ said Vila. ‘Why not ask him about it? He’s the one with the fixation on the place.’

But Avon was not available for comment. He alternated between the hold where he continued to work on the materials provided by the Ghammarans, and his cabin where he grabbed short snatches of sleep.

‘And it was originally put in orbit near Mars?’

Vila nodded again.

‘So what is it doing here?’

‘Running away?’

‘And you say that evolution has been speeded up a millionfold to produce monsters called Links?’

Vila became more forthcoming. ‘According to Servalan they are what mankind will become. Our descendants.’

‘How did she know that?’

‘How do I know?’

‘Haven’t you ever wondered?’

‘The only wondering I’ve done is how to avoid going back down there. When we came here before we were eaten by space fluid, attacked by Links, ambushed by Servalan and beaten by Federation guards. Cally was killed, Avon seemed to be constantly out of his mind and we were eventually caught by a madman who wanted to feed us to his alter ego. Are you surprised I’m not excited by the prospect of a return?’

‘Knowing you, Vila,’ said Korell kindly, ‘No. But I’m still struck by the number of questions that hang over the place. The data in Blake’s memory concerning it is very out of date. It was built by a consortium of business interests as a sort of experiment to help develop faster food production but none of the records record what happened, why it moved, how it moved, or anything.’

‘We seemed to be haunted by people trying for faster food production,’ said Vila. Korell looked up curiously. ‘On Skat the original settlers were trying to develop better crop yields before they found the black hole. The Ghammarans said they used space travel only to secure food supplies they needed from a few underdeveloped planets, and now this place. I can tell you that no one in their right mind would grow a single pack of food concentrate down there.’

‘Vila, you’re a genius.’

‘I know, I keep telling everyone, but no one ever believes me.’ Despite his quick retort Vila wondered what on earth he had said. One thing was certain, he wouldn’t spoil the spell by asking. Korell was quiet; Vila looked at her intently, but she just smiled and said nothing. Up on the screens the first, and probably only, man made planet was gradually getting larger.

As orbit was established Avon made a reappearance on the control deck. ‘What have you built down there,’ asked Vila at once, ‘an escape capsule?’

Avon ignored the jibe. ‘Korell, I want you to take the ship in and land at the grid references fed into Blake. When we land I shall unload the items that I have in the hold and you will be free to take off again.’

‘This is insane,’ Vila told him. ‘You are re-running exactly what happened with *Liberator*. The only difference is that this time we don’t have a ship that is falling apart at the seams.’ Vila looked around nervously. ‘At least, not yet.’

‘So you will be able to take off again.’

‘But what keeps bringing you back here? And what keeps you insisting that you always do it alone?’

‘Does it matter?’ asked Avon. He had the air of a man too tired to bother with debate.

‘Yes it does. Last time we had to drag you out of the mess you created by deciding to go wandering about on that iceball down there.’

‘Did you say ice?’ Korell asked.

‘Well not exactly ice, but it was windy and cold,’ Vila acknowledged.

‘There’s no ice down there now. No wind and no cold. The planet is hot – in some places very hot. Its orbit must have changed dramatically...’

‘What does that matter?’ said Vila frantically. He turned back to Avon. ‘If you had told us what was going on we might well have been able to save you without losing Cally.’

‘So you should have left me and done what I told you. Then Cally would still be alive.’

Vila was struck by a sudden thought. ‘You’re not going back because you think Cally is alive? We didn’t find the body, but she couldn’t still be there... Not after all this time.’

‘If I find the grave I’ll lay a wreath from you.’

‘Were you close to Cally?’ asked Korell.

Avon spoke rapidly. ‘Cally was a good fighter, intelligent and moderately unemotional. Those are qualities that can be admired. In as much as I admired such qualities I was close to her. But what I am going to do has nothing to do with Cally’s death. She is dead Vila, and reminding me of the

fact is a waste of everyone's time. Now will you put us down on the planet Korell, or do I have to do it myself?'

'I think the safety of the ship, if nothing else, demands that I do it,' she replied, and the descent began.

Even Vila had to admit the planet had changed dramatically since he was last there. According to Avon they had landed close to the spot where they teleported on their last mission. The cold biting wind was gone and there was no sign of any of the creatures they had met before. The foliage had also disappeared. Instead they now found themselves on a sandy soil. In the distance there was water – a huge lake, possibly even a sea. The sun shone down warm but, at least at this latitude not unbearably hot. The ground retained the uneven quality Vila had found before, but even that seemed to have modified and evened out.

Avon took care of his own unloading. The equipment that Vila had last seen sprinkled around the hold was now packed into two crates. Whether it was still in parts or now unified into one working machine couldn't be seen. Vila once more tried to persuade Avon to explain, but met with no success.

As Avon continued preparing for his departure, Vila walked disconsolately back to the control room. Finding himself alone, he asked the computer for an analysis of the situation.

'Avon is unloading silicon-based equipment onto the planet's surface,' said Blake.

'I know that, you useless pile of junk,' Vila retorted. 'What I want to know is, why is he doing it? What is his plan?'

'I cannot answer that question owing to the disconnection of certain functional levels of my operating system,' said Blake.

Vila was stunned. He had been under the impression that the ship's computer was now restored to normal, with the single exception of viewing

facilities to the hold. Vila ran through the ship, out of the airlock and onto the planet's surface, and immediately confronted Avon with his discovery.

'The ship's computers will operate perfectly adequately for the purposes of controlling the ship,' replied Avon stiffly.

Vila turned to Korell standing close by. 'Is he still sticking to the plan to go off into the sunset and leave us?' he asked.

'There has been slight progress,' Korell replied. 'I have agreed to stay with the ship on the ground for five hours. Avon will come back within that time. If he doesn't we can do whatever we please.'

'Five hours,' said Avon and with that he marched away from the *Revenge* in the direction of the water, pulling the two crates behind him on an improvised sledge.

'Good luck,' shouted Vila, and then in a lower voice, 'whatever it is you're up to.'

Slowly the pair made their way back into the ship.

'Do you know what he's doing?' asked Vila.

'Not exactly. But whatever has been driving that man for the past few years is here, or around here, or connected with here, or reached from here or...'

'Thank you,' said Vila, 'but if it's that vague I'd rather not know.'

Korell laughed. She wanted to explain, if for no other reason than to hear out her own theories. 'It's not so bad, Vila. Whatever it is that has been pushing Avon has a connection with this planet. Now it may not be that Terminal is the answer, but if it isn't it must be a means to the answer. Just think about all the inexplicable things about this planet. Its shape, its origins, its location, its change of climate. All that means something to Avon.'

'It doesn't mean much to me.'

'No, but it will do soon.'

'You really think Avon will come back?'

‘It doesn’t matter. I made the ship’s water supply radioactive two days ago. We can follow him on the scanner.’

Vila was appalled. ‘Radio-active? You’ll cripple us.’ Suddenly Vila felt weak. He sat down heavily.

‘Relax,’ Korell told him. ‘There’s enough to give a trace, no more. It’s like putting fluoride in the water to keep your teeth healthy.’

Vila looked unconvinced but kept quiet. He wondered why he’d developed toothache. Korell put the screens on. The landscape as mapped from the air during their descent was put on the screen. A bright red pulse showed Avon walking.

After ten minutes the pulse stopped: ‘What’s he hanging around for?’ asked Vila.

‘Probably nothing,’ Korell told him. ‘He could be going underground. Look, the pulse is getting slightly weaker. Did you go underground before?’

‘What civilisation there was was underground. Servalan had her HQ there. We saw a few buildings in the distance but they looked run down – probably smashed up by the Links. I tell you something else. There were major volcanic eruptions going on at the time we left. Servalan had set charges all over the place, and as the underground tunnels began to collapse with the explosions everything else began to break up too.’

‘I doubt if they were really volcanic,’ said Korell. ‘There’s nothing at the centre of the planet that could cause that sort of activity.’ She looked back at the screen. ‘Avon’s definitely underground. Are you sure the tunnels were all blown in?’

‘We didn’t hang around long enough to find out,’ Vila said. ‘There were so many explosions it wasn’t safe waiting. Even Orac got dented.’

The flashing dot on the screen was now progressing, but very slowly indeed. Vila remembered the scene underground as the explosions had started off the collapse. He shuddered and tried to find something to take his

mind off the situation. 'Avon thinks you are a spy of Servalan,' he said. It seemed a fair way of opening up a new conversation.

'He's thought that since I first found him. In a sense he's right – I am.'

Vila fell off his chair. Korell laughed. 'Servalan recruited me to keep an eye on Avon a year ago. It took me months to find him. By the time I had there had been the shoot-out at Gauda Prime and Avon was locked in a cell. I must have arrived just after everyone else left.'

'I didn't see you.'

'I'm very discreet.'

'So you don't know what happened there any more than Avon does?'

'No.'

'But it is only Avon that Servalan wants. She must know that Avon is the one with the brains. She won't want to worry about me. You could just drop me off on some little backwater planet somewhere and tell Servalan that I ran away. She'd believe that. Or tell her...'

Vila stopped because Korell was still laughing at him. 'Servalan recruited me but I'm not working for her. My job was to follow Avon and eventually find a way of reporting back on what he is up to. But once I've done that my life won't be worth a credit. She'll have me eliminated in case I've picked up some of the knowledge that Avon has tucked away in his head about computers, teleports, plasma shields and everything else he seems to know about.'

'That's a relief,' said Vila. 'If I can believe it.'

'Vila, you can leave any time any place you like. You can walk out now, or wait for the next planet, or the one after that, or the one after that. But I hope you won't. I rather like you, and you are a very good thief.' And she blew Vila a kiss before returning to the screen. Vila collapsed back in his chair certain (at least for the moment) that never again could he leave Korell's side.

Avon, on the other hand, was starting to have doubts about the viability of ever returning to anyone's side. He had planned to make his way through the entry hatch that he had used on his last visit to Terminal, into the underground tunnels, and then work a route around the blocked passageways using the by-pass tunnels that would have been built to carry emergency air supplies from the surface, and to act as emergency escape routes. But these too now appeared to have been blocked in the explosions that wrecked much of the underground complex. Just as he was thinking he would have to make another overground trek to find the next entry point, he located a small air duct, just large enough for him to crawl down. The grille had already been knocked out, but the iron ladder was still firmly attached to the wall. Carefully he made his way down into the pitch darkness. After ten minutes' descent he found himself standing on a pile of rubble but with no obvious way out of the duct. For a moment Avon considered the possibility that so much debris had come down the duct that he was still many feet above the bottom of the shaft. But his boots kicked the unmistakable form of the grille blown out from the top of the shaft. That would obviously have been the first thing to go down. If there had been rubble it would have come after the grille, and the grille should then be buried. Avon was clearly on the bottom.

He picked out a tiny nuclear torch from his pocket and shone it around the circular base of the shaft. Half way round he found the join he was looking for. At the first push nothing gave, at the second, with a severe creak, it moved back.

Avon walked out into a wide passageway apparently undamaged by Servalan's destructiveness. As far as he could judge he was probably several levels below the location the woman had chosen for her HQ, in what must at one time have been a recreation area for senior scientists. It was beginning to seem that his deductions had been right. Servalan had

only been interested in Terminal as a suitable out-of-the-way location for trapping Avon and getting hold of *Liberator*. She had probably never even instructed her troops to search at these lower levels.

Carefully, unwilling to believe his own deductions that there was nothing to fear down here, Avon made his way through the tunnels, his torch picking out the accumulated rubbish plus the odd skeleton, representing decades of neglect.

His first priority was the establishment that this was, indeed, the lowest level. He checked a door. The main circuits were of course dead and it refused to slide open to his touch. But then the emergency fusion battery back-ups took up the request and the door slid back. Avon peered into a small store room, moved back into the main corridor and continued his cautious probing through the pitch darkness, penetrated only by the photon beam from his hand-held light pack.

On *Revenge*, Vila was dozing in his chair in the main control room. To his right Korell continued to watch the screen closely. Neither occupant of the ship was in any way prepared for the explosion that shook the whole ship and threw both of them to the floor.

‘Take off,’ screamed Vila. ‘Avon’s triggered some more explosions. The whole place will fall apart any second now.’

‘We can’t leave Avon,’ Korell shouted back.

‘Yes we can,’ replied Vila, still shouting as loud as possible, despite the fact that the initial sounds of the explosion appeared to have died away. He lowered his voice a little. ‘We can go into orbit and then come back when it’s safe. Avon’s bound to have a communicator. He can call us if he wants.’

‘He’s still moving,’ said Korell. ‘Not very much though – as if he is in a confined space.’ And then she stopped speaking, for it was now clearly possible to hear a low rumbling which appeared to come from the very ground itself.

‘Take the ship up,’ pleaded Vila, but still Korell would not agree, although she did set the controls in readiness for a rapid blast-off just in case the ground underneath them gave way. At the same time she put all the ship’s scanners on different screens. One of them immediately caught her eye. She cried to Vila and pointed at it. For a moment he didn’t realise what he was looking at. Then he saw. The sun in the sky was getting smaller. But that was impossible. The ship was still on the ground.

‘It’s a super nova,’ he called. And then in a calm voice, ‘Of all the ways to end. Our deaths will be seen in the skies of a million planets.’

‘Very poetic Vila,’ said Korell, ‘but also very untrue. I didn’t know you read poetry.’

‘My mother did,’ said Vila. ‘But what is it if it’s not the first stage in a star explosion?’

‘The first stage in a take-off. The whole planet is on the move. That rumbling must have been the engines. And Avon has found a way of starting them up.’

‘You mean Avon is driving his own planet?’

‘So it would seem. Look at the screens now.’

Outside it was growing dark as the star that had previously given light and warmth to the surface of the planet receded and became just another blue-white dot in the sky. Within minutes a deep permafrost covered the ground. Korell shone a powerful light towards the sea, and saw the deep blues and sparkling whites of half formed waves now frozen, never to make the shore.

‘It was the only explanation,’ Korell told Vila. ‘A pointed planet in the wrong place. Evolution speeded up a million-fold. Terminal had been moved and the power to move it is inside the planet itself.’

‘So now Avon has a planet instead of a spaceship. What are we going to do? And don’t say that we should go and find him. It’s freezing out there.’

‘Since the planet is flying through space, and the only thing we could do if we took off would also be to fly through space, I guess we just sit and wait and see what he does next. Besides,’ she added, tapping out commands onto the template in front of her position that linked to Blake, ‘I’m not sure we can do much else. The navigation controls are locked on a route that takes us out of this sector altogether. We can either fly out or wait. We can’t go into orbit, nor can we follow the same course as Terminal at a safe distance behind.’

Korell considered the implications of this development and frowned. Since she had first met Avon on Gauda Prime she had found more and more that her predictions about Avon were becoming less and less reliable. She knew beyond doubt that in the early days Avon had thought a lot about her, and as Vila had reminded her, he had guessed her connections with Servalan. Yet he had made no move to remove her from the ship. With a moment’s sudden inspiration she checked the food stores. Avon had removed a considerable amount of concentrate – not enough to cause a problem to herself and Vila but still a considerable amount of food. It looked as if he were planning on a long stay on Terminal.

She thought again. If Avon seriously thought Korell was with Servalan he would know that she could signal Servalan with Avon’s whereabouts at any time. What was his planning? Did he now think Korell was not working for Servalan? Or did he think she would hold off until she had more information to give? Or was the planet armed in such a way as to make any attempt to get him impossible? That would seem unlikely – Servalan had blown up whole planets before, and the artificial environment would seem unlikely to stop her repeating the procedure.

As she pondered further, Korell’s mind turned to even more remote regions. The talk of the myth of MIND. Could the hard-headed Avon really be taken in by a myth as she had suggested? It seemed utterly unlikely, and she had hoped her baiting of him would have given clearer insights into

Avon's motives; but it hadn't happened. He had led everyone on a totally reckless journey to Terminal once before. Could that be explained entirely by his already having at that time a clear knowledge of what was to be found on Terminal?

She began to list the unsolved problems that had gathered around Avon like bees around honey, writing them directly onto the computer screen in front of her position. Each problem she turned into an isolated dataline, and as the lines began to fill up the screen she considered the links between them. She gave space to the troop disappearances on Gauda Prime and to the curious existence of KAT, a computer with powers far beyond what should be necessary for kinesthetic analysis and transmission. She linked that with KAT's apparent existence without tarriel cells. Why, she contemplated, should anyone want to build a non-tarriel computer anyway, even if it were possible? Separately she noted the re-occurrence of the topic of rural environments, and linked that with Avon's absorption with MIND.

As she worked Vila looked over Korell's shoulder. She let him, confident that whereas Avon would have seen clues at once Vila would hardly bother to concentrate on the progressions she was inventing. As it turned out her guess was right. Avon would immediately have concentrated on the aspects of their time together which Korell did not list. Vila didn't seem to notice.

Korell looked at the embryonic program. At the commencement she added 'Blake' and at the conclusion 'Avon'. Find the link between the two, she knew, and she could have the whole mission tied up without further ado. The clue to the link was somewhere in that program, but she couldn't see it and nor could the Blake computer operating in a much-reduced capacity. Back on Gauda Prime it had all seemed so much easier. Now she began to suspect that Avon had been playing with her. He knew she would sit in *Revenge* and wait for him, and whilst doing so would review the evidence. For that reason he had removed certain key sections from the

Blake computer which stopped the logical links between those six points being analysed.

Remaining true to her personality, Korell did not slam a fist on the table, nor pace up and down the room restlessly. But inside she vowed to make Avon pay for this particular burst of egotism.

She turned to the options at her disposal. She could either do nothing, take off, or try and contact Avon. Physical contact was out of the question since Avon had clearly walked a considerable distance when he had left *Revenge*. In the frozen wasteland that the planet had become, the only way to make the journey was wearing thermal protection suits, which were hardly standard issue for space freighters. That left the option of wearing space suits, which equally was hardly feasible for a two mile walk in normal gravity. And since she wasn't going to run away, that brought back the single option of contacting Avon without leaving the ship.

Korell felt like a child being led along a pre-planned path. She gave Blake a series of commands, and expressed no surprise when the computer accepted them. Certain higher level pathways within the computing complex had been left open.

'The link to Avon's position will only work under certain conditions. Those conditions have been met. I can put you in touch with Avon,' said Blake formally.

'Wait,' called Korell, stopping the computer just in time. 'What were the conditions?'

'That five hours should pass between the take-off and your requesting contact; that during the time you should not have tried to make contact with any other person, that Avon should not have called in with a code word himself, and that no landings should have been made on Terminal.'

'Trustful isn't he?' said Vila, watching with interest. 'It's a typical Avon move. Leave us in the dark, set up a load of instructions in the computer. He

probably told Blake to reduce himself to rubble if you tried to call Servalan. Isn't that right Blake?'

Blake confirmed it was, more or less so. 'Very well,' said Korell. 'We talk to him on his terms. Let us communicate.'

The picture that came on the screen was clear. Avon was sitting with his back to a panel of controls, flashing lights and computer equipment. As contact was made he spun round and smiled. 'Korell, Vila, come over here. There is work to do.'

'Two reasons why not,' said Vila. 'One is you've made it so cold outside it must be near absolute zero, and two because I don't like the sound of work.'

'There is an entry port one hundred and twenty yards ahead of the ship,' Avon said. 'You can make it wearing space suits. Or you can stay in *Revenge* if you like.' And with that he cut contact.

Despite the inevitable protests of Vila, they got into their suits, left the ship and began the slow trudge through the permafrost. The sky above was pitch black, with only a handful of stars shining this far from the galactic centre. There was no sense of movement, any more than there was on a normal planet, for in many ways Terminal was a normal planet. It just happened to be travelling between the stars rather than around one of them.

As they walked Vila complained of the cold, the weight of the suit, the distance to the entry bay, the likelihood of getting lost, and then suddenly he shut up. In the distance there was a moan, turning rapidly into a shriek. For a split second it made Vila stand still. Then as the sound repeated, only this time closer, it made him move faster than Korell would have thought possible. She followed him, frightened but curious.

The entrance turned out to be a set of glass-covered panels with white surrounds raised at 45 degrees to the ground. Korell and Vila approached cautiously, but as soon as they were next to the entry bay one of the panels swung back to reveal not the staircase that Vila expected, but a single

chamber, with room for two. Vila looked at the enclosed space cautiously. A sudden movement near him made him leap forward. Korell moved equally quickly and they collided together in the small chamber. The outer door remained wide open, enabling them to make out in the starlight a hideous form. It was perhaps thirty feet tall with wide wings and a bullet-like head. There appeared to be two massive hind legs, although it was the two much smaller fore legs thrashing about in the air that gained closer attention. These were the ones that would do the damage. One swipe from either would leave the victim torn in two. The creature obviously knew where Korell and Vila were standing, presumably from the smell, for it was difficult to see anything in the mediocre star light. It made its way relentlessly towards them, crunching the hard frost as it walked. In total desperation Vila searched for any sort of control mechanism that would activate the door, but there was none. As he looked back out the creature made it to the entrance hatch and put out a forelimb to pick up Korell.

Vila swore ever after that Avon left the closing of the hatchway until the last moment to derive some morbid pleasure from seeing how dependent Korell and he were upon him, now that Terminal was on the move. Certainly inside the control room Avon had managed to get a number of surface monitors working, including one which now showed a clear picture of the creature stomping around the hatchway wondering where its prey had gone. For several moments after the hatchway had closed and the lift began to take them down Vila continued to look straight ahead in dumb horror.

‘Instant transmutation,’ Avon pronounced when Korell asked for an explanation of the creature’s origins. ‘Life on this planet genetically transmutes to adapt to changing circumstances. It’s the survival pattern that the original seeding introduced by the Terminal Consortium. They were looking for new life forms and new food supplies. They certainly got the former.’

Korell noted the comment (or rather lack of it) on the latter. But having got away from the creature she showed no further interest in looking outside. She was more fascinated with every aspect of the interior of the man-made planet, and Avon showed no hesitation in letting Korell discover the layout of this section of the planet. As he had conjectured, the central power machinery and its controls had not been damaged by the devastation wreaked by Servalan. Although some of the passageways were dusty they allowed free access through this level and the one above. There were sleeping quarters close by, along with plenty of food concentrates and a variety of clothing.

‘Korell, I need to know much more about the forces that operate this ship and the way it is manoeuvred. The controls are over there,’ Avon indicated across the room with a wave of one hand. ‘Vila, I want those compartments open, and also the five doors on the right in the corridor outside this room.’

Asked to work in his own speciality and still shaking from his experience on the surface Vila readily agreed, but stopped work almost immediately when he discovered that Korell had refused to join in.

‘Avon,’ she said, ‘I concede that a whole planet could be more comfortable than a spaceship and is certainly somewhat more spacious, but that in itself is not sufficient reason for coming here, going through the melodramatics and getting Terminal on the move. Before I start work which will result in my giving you the secrets of this planet, I want to know why I am giving them to you and what I am getting out of it.’

Avon did not trouble to argue. ‘I am going to finish the work I set out to do five years ago, and this time there will be no error. The Federation is used to thinking about me in relation to Blake and all his political activities, and have forgotten my real interest in life. And with the way I have it planned they won’t even know what I have done. I am going to break the banking cartel, totally, finally and utterly, by removing from the system ten thousand million credits.’

Vila's attempts to make space travel more bearable were continuing to bear fruit, and in a way that he could never have dreamed possible. Not one single second of his time on Terminal seemed to weigh on Vila's hands. There were an infinite number of doors to open: cupboards, safes, bedrooms, food stores, drinks cabinets, computer access panels. They had all been locked before the last occupants of this level had left. And whatever the reason for their departure they had certainly not left in a hurry. Everything was put away in its place, waiting to be reclaimed at some future unspecified date. Sometimes Vila found electronic components that had Avon almost overwhelmed enough to thank him. Sometimes he opened up bypass channels that freed data banks which kept Korell awake for twenty-four hours at a stretch checking them through. And sometimes he found stores of relaxants that had himself and KAT in ecstasy for hours on end.

The underground locations went on for ever, and as time passed Vila seriously began to wonder if it was possible to walk around the whole planet on the inside. If that were so, he calculated (with the help of KAT during one of their more sober moments) then it would, at their present rate of progress, take them three hundred and twenty-seven years to make their way round the world once, and they would still have consumed only about one tenth of one percent of the relaxants and stimulants they came by.

Here at last he had found his life's work. True, the adoring masses that he had dreamed of were not there to sing his praises, but Korell was always pleasant, and even Avon seemed to have reduced his natural hostility to Vila by one or two degrees. Indeed, so involved was Vila in the whole activity of moving around the planet that the fact that he had been told little of Avon's grand plan for the ten thousand million credit swindle caused him little concern. But nudged on by the ever-curious KAT it did gradually dawn on him that they were approaching Earth and it might be advantageous to

know a little of what to expect. Sensibly, Vila chose a moment to ask when Korell too was present. Avon was surprisingly forthcoming, but did, he noticed, talk more to Korell than to Vila.

‘The Administration’s credit system on Earth was set up with the one simple idea of enabling the Federation to expand. All other functions are secondary and hence dealt with by lower levels of computer operation. The troops out on the frontiers need to be paid, and so do the civilian workers. Also whenever a new planet is brought into the Federation the old currency is immediately declared invalid and Federation Credits are brought in, effectively tying the planet to the Federation economic system. They gain complete Federation control – political, military and economic.

‘The economic dependence by the planets is secured by ensuring that all development comes only through long term loans at punitive rates of interest. Whenever the planets can’t pay, the loans are renegotiated over even longer periods. So when there is a political uprising the Federation can agree to the planet’s independence just as soon as all outstanding debts are paid off. This can’t happen so the control is maintained; those wanting withdrawal are forced into violent confrontation and the violence of the Federation is legitimised. It is a standard pattern which has been practised as far back as history goes.’

Vila looked as if he were going to make a comment. Avon cut him off, continuing with his exposition. ‘To reduce corruption at the Federation end the whole system has long been computerised – not just the handling of the day to day banking functions but also the decisions as to which loans are granted.’ Avon turned away to the banks of machinery. ‘Terminal Computer,’ he called.

‘On line’ came the response. The voice was cold, mechanical, emotionless. It was the sort of computer that Avon could work with.

‘What is the economic situation of planet Aarn-12?’

‘The planet has a debt of 537 million credits over a twenty year period. Repayment of the loan is progressing behind schedule.’

Avon turned back to his companions. There was no triumph in his voice, no sign that his major strategy was drawing to fulfilment. The computer continued. ‘Facilities for the loan were already in existence when we landed. And according to the loan control computer on Aarn-12 they still have what they think they have always had, debts of 500 million. But Finance-7, the main banking computer on Earth, registers them as having 507 million. Since the debt will never be recovered the difference is irrelevant and will not be discovered. Particularly since the aim of Finance-7 is to increase planetary debts. When it does that it is functioning at full efficiency and has no program instructions to cross-check how it got there.’

‘Meanwhile, the remaining seven million is in a credit file logged in an account controlled by Kerr Avon. Where are the accounts Avon?’

‘On the seven hundred and thirty-one planets which have computer links with Terminal. Those planets all jointly sponsored the research on Terminal, and used the links to retrieve data from the experiment. It seems they didn’t trust the research teams that were out here to tell them what was going on. Those links can take us into the heart of the computer systems on each of those planets without anyone ever knowing data is coming through. With a billion transactions passing a day, from grain forecasts to starship docking patterns, no one is going to look into one person depositing credits, especially when it helps their banking reserves.’

‘Avon, this is brilliant.’ Vila was overcome. ‘You know,’ he added on reflection, ‘I particularly like the bit where I don’t get shot.’

‘There is just one other thing we have to do.’

‘Yes?’ said Vila more rapidly than he meant. He was so overwhelmed by the scheme he was ready to take on anything.

‘It is just possible that during a routine cross check on Finance-7 by the other economic computers some of the discrepancies will be discovered.

That is no problem in itself because the computer will just consider itself better off than it thought it was. But if the check reveals that all the discrepancies occurred during the same two month spell, that could spell disaster. I need to go to Earth to modify two circuits in Finance-7.'

Vila stared. 'You are not seriously telling us that you intend to present yourself on Earth to the Administration? Hasn't it occurred to you that you could be recognised?'

Avon did not answer. Korell tried a different tack. 'A teleport system would have helped,' she said. She had a nasty feeling that the more Avon explained, the less she understood of what was really going on.

Avon pressed a control. 'Terminal Computer, attack alert.'

A wide range of lights flashed on and two sirens sounded. Avon silenced them with the touch of another contact.

'Full alert acknowledged. Defence capability ninety three percent in operation,' announced the computer.

'It's not Federation. Not approaching Earth like that without a command ship at the front,' said Korell.

'And without anything coming up on computer chatter,' said Vila watching his monitors. 'They ought to be telling the Administration to put on a major reception for that sort of fleet.'

'Well now, if that is not a Federation fleet and it's not the Administration's own troops, then there is only one person who would dare to drive this sort of fleet against Earth.'

'Servalan!'

'If Servalan is attacking the Administration on Earth, where are the Federation forces?' asked Korell. She looked worried.

'Grid reference 489273.' The voice was that of Terminal Computer.

Everyone peered closely at the monitors. There, sure enough, was a Federation fleet, complete with battle cruisers and warships, bearing in on Servalan's forces. As they watched the Federation forces split into two, one splinter continuing the movement towards Servalan and the other section heading towards Earth.

Avon reacted rapidly. 'Terminal Computer, give me an analysis of the activities of the fleets on the screen.'

The computer's answer was immediate. 'The force under the command of Servalan is engaged on an attack upon Earth's Administration. At the same time there is a defence force from the Administration which is currently passing Mars orbit on its way to meet this fleet.' Vila pointed to a number of dots which represented the Administration's own ill-equipped, and probably ill-prepared small fleet now clearly launched on its way. 'The Federation fleet is commanded by Yardynn.'

Korell repeated the name.

'You know him?' asked Avon.

'He's a star fleet commander – one of the Academy's bright young things. In fact, now I come to think of it, he trained as a pilot in the same year that your old friend Tarrant did. He's been making noises recently about the need to re-establish a firm hand, and how the Administration is too weak willed to control the Military. A lot of noise, but I don't think anyone really anticipated a direct attack on Earth by him. It would make sense, though. After making all the threats and getting away with it he's probably been goaded by other officers to put some action where his mouth is. So now he's using the opportunity of Servalan's attack to get rid both of her and the civil Administration on Earth. He's aiming to be the new President and Supreme Commander all rolled into one.'

'A three-sided civil war,' said Vila. 'Servalan, Yardynn's Federation troops and the Earth Administration troops. And I wouldn't give much chance for Earth. They can't be used to fighting with the likes of Servalan and Yardynn. And where does that leave us, Avon?'

'Exactly where we were before. Whoever wins, there will be a need for an economy and expansionist policies to try to mop up pockets of resistance and establish a new order.'

Vila disagreed. He decided that it was time for panic measures. 'If we get out now, Avon, we'll have five million. That's enough. Get Terminal under way.'

'No, that is not enough,' said Avon. 'The plan could be discovered at any moment. We stay. This time we will see it through. I will not be defeated again.'

Vila gave up the argument for the moment and turned back to the screen. The fleets were getting closer; engagements of the three-sided battle began as Yardynn's Federation ships moved carefully in against Servalan's small fleet, and were simultaneously engaged on their other flank by the troops of the Administration. Both battles were remarkably short. Despite their vastly inferior numbers Servalan's forces exterminated much of the Federation fleet, suffering few losses in the process. Meanwhile the Administration and Federation seemed to be totally ineffective against each other.

'Servalan's nefarious arms dealing must have been even more extensive than we imagined,' observed Korell. 'The Administration and Yardynn can't hurt each other with disintegrating weaponry, and Servalan can just walk in. We should warn the Administration of what is happening, before you go to Earth.'

'I would think,' said Avon carefully, 'that even a commander of the most limited intelligence on Earth would be able to guess that his troops' weapons are proving useless, as are the Federation's, whilst Servalan's forces are being able to walk through unharmed. Unless of course the commander was Vila.'

'But we can't just let Servalan take over the whole of the Galaxy,' protested Vila.

'Servalan will have better things to do than reconstruct the entire banking system of the Federation. And even if she knows that the funds have been diverted illegally she will still do nothing. We carry on – the diversion of a revolution will only strengthen our hand by diverting forces away from

conventional law enforcement. And never forget, whoever wins out of those three forces will have an overriding desire for expansion and power. To achieve that they need an active banking system. Korell and I will go to Earth in *Revenge*, you stay inside Terminal.' There was a long pause. It seemed that Avon had made his final pronouncement, but he had one more thing to say. 'And Vila...'

Vila looked up. He had a feeling this could be important.

'Don't let any of the creatures in.'

'Creatures!' Vila was suddenly worried. 'I'd forgotten about them. What happens if they mutate into something that can pick locks?'

'Don't worry,' replied Avon, 'I doubt if even this planet contains DNA stupid enough to produce a generation of Vilas.'

Korell's flying of *Revenge* through the three-sided battle would have been recognised as an excellent piece of strategic manoeuvring if anyone other than Korell, Avon and Vila had seen it. Viewed from the galactic plain she would have appeared to be flying straight up away from the sun and its family of planets. The effect was to take *Revenge* out of the body of the action whilst Servalan's ships now pressed in hard from the orbit of Neptune, sizing up for a major battle with the Administration forces. The Administration in turn took up positions in and out of the moons of Saturn; a clever move which gave them an advantage of detailed knowledge of some very tricky terrain, plus the possibility of being able to use craft which could fly in and out of some of the smaller satellites and even hide behind the tilt of the rings. Servalan, with her fleet fully committed, found herself without suitable craft for such encounters and was forced to hold her troops back, awaiting developments.

For Avon and Korell, Saturn was never anything more than a barely visible dot as they gently manoeuvred towards Earth. Approaching from above they gave regular warnings of their position, their mission (Financial

Advisors to the planet Skat in the Third quadrant, as Avon had described themselves in his dealing with the Administration) and stressed also that they were summoned to appear before the Finance Computer Complex F-7 on Earth on conventional loan matters.

As Avon had predicted, the Administration was only too pleased to have civilians coming and going about their ordinary business whilst they dealt with a 'little difficulty elsewhere' as it was described to the local populace. And, as he also pointed out, if anyone thought that something strange was going on the first thing they would do would be to send a scout ship to Skat, which should slow down the enquiry somewhat. Landing on Earth was equally easy. They were of course diverted away from all the main installations to a Dome situated by a huge seaway in the northern hemisphere, known as the Scandin Terminal. Such a location discouraged anyone from taking a forbidden walk outside the Domes, especially as the hemisphere was currently in winter. The icy winds blew continuously from the north, and the sea was frozen solid from shore to horizon. Civilisation could only survive with environmental protection.

A covered companionway came out to the ship's docking hatch and matched up with its size. Avon left Korell on the ship and walked the five hundred yards of corridor that took him back onto his native planet for the first time in five years. For a moment he let his normally controlled mind wander. He had left the planet a prisoner, seemingly doomed to spend the rest of his life in exile on some forsaken outer world inhabited entirely by criminals. From that point he had risen to become one of the most famous individuals in the Galaxy, representing a revolution he never believed in to people he never wanted to meet. Blake, the man who fought for the revolution, who had left Earth in the same transporter as Avon, and who had vowed as he left that one day he would return, had never made it back apart from in a futile raid on a non-existent computer centre, and ended up dying

half way across the Galaxy on a planet little better than the one to which he had been transported.

As he crossed the gangway into the reception area, Avon pulled himself back together. That brief reminiscence had cleared his mind. He would, of course, never admit it had happened. It would probably not happen again for another five years. He was ready.

The empty reception room was too warm for comfort. The walls were bare apart from speaker and viewing grilles placed ten feet apart just below the ceiling. 'Place your identification cards in the deposit box.' The computer voice was emotionless and cold. Avon moved across the room and did as commanded, placing the seven cards on a white plate. After a moment the voice returned. 'Remove the cards.' Avon obeyed.

'Move into the next room.' A door slid open and Avon proceeded through. The room into which he entered was just as bare as the first save for some chairs. He sat on one and waited, concentrating his mind on the task ahead whilst reviewing the series of calculated guesses he had been forced to make, including the ones relating to Korell, and what she would do on *Revenge* in his absence.

Vila meanwhile was having little time to wonder. Watching the screens and talking to Terminal Computer, he became aware that the three-sided war was moving much more rapidly towards him than he had previously anticipated. With *Revenge* now gone there was nothing to show that the planet was inhabited, nor indeed was there much to show that the planet was even there. It was far too far away from the Sun to give off any reflected light. It would show up on screens as a large, odd shaped bit of rock, be diagnosed by navigators as an off-course asteroid and be avoided.

At least that was the rationalisation that Korell and Avon had presented Vila with, but now he was not so sure. There seemed to be more ships on

the screen every second, and they were all intent on heading, or perhaps drifting, Vila's way. He turned to the computers for information.

'The battle being fought two hundred thousand spacial from here is a close encounter battle, with ships flying within ten spacial of each other at times. The lack of active weaponry among two sets of forces, and the desire by all sides to capture their opponents' ships for use later, means that few shots are being fired. The battle therefore is taking on a direction of its own. It is in effect drifting.'

'And that means drifting this way,' said Vila.

'That is correct,' the computer told him.

In vain Vila searched the sky for any sign of *Revenge*, but he knew that even if Avon had landed on Earth and then taken off again immediately they would never have had time to do the round trip safely. Perhaps they had aborted the trip, deciding to return to Terminal and await a cessation in hostilities. He looked again; there was still no sign. Perhaps they had already been shot down. Desperation filled Vila's heart. The inside of Terminal lost its charm and appeal. His five months of isolation on Gauda Prime had taught him once and for all that he needed company. Even if it was just Avon's.

He looked back at the screen. On the far left there seemed to be a new fleet moving in; a small fleet in small ships. Vila called up a report.

'They do not appear to belong to any of the three main protagonists in this conflict,' he was told.

'Wonderful,' he said half to himself. 'Now half the tribes in the Galaxy have heard there's a fight for Earth going on and they're all coming to pile in.'

'From the evidence available so far,' continued the computer, ignoring Vila's comments, 'they would seem to come from the Fifth sector, but there is sufficient data to...' The voice faded, and stopped all together. Vila touched some controls. Nothing happened.

‘Vila!’ the voice was KAT.

‘Not now,’ hissed Vila. The last thing he needed at this juncture was a conversation with a half-alert computer demanding more soma. ‘Terminal Computer,’ he urged. ‘Come on, come on. You can’t give up on me now you useless collection of cells. It’s bad enough without anyone else here, but I need you.’

Terminal Computer remained silent. Vila looked at the massive array of contacts in front of him thoughtfully produced by Terminal Consortium. Sadly the Consortium members had not seen fit to provide indicators on most contacts to show what they were supposed to do, and he had already eliminated those which he knew how to work. Vila pushed a few points of light at random but nothing happened. On the screens the approach of the fourth set of ships continued. From nowhere and everywhere came sounds.

Vila’s hand was held in suspended animation midway through the air. He stopped breathing.

‘Vila!’

‘Shut up you drunken heap of junk,’ replied Vila, before thoughtfully telling Terminal Computer that the reference was to KAT and not him, or rather it, or rather...

Vila bent his head forward. There definitely was a noise. It seemed to come from the mainframe itself. On the screens a few of Servalan’s ships were turning away from the main fleet, moving to face the unknown column.

‘Vila!’ KAT was getting insistent. ‘Shut Terminal Computer down. Sir, shut it down now. Vila!’

Vila was entering a dream. Slightly outside his new vision was the sound of KAT urging him to do something. It seemed an effort; too much effort. Not worth considering at all. Perhaps if it were important KAT would talk again, but it looked as if KAT had given up the unequal fight... Better that way. No need to move...

Avon was summoned into an enquiry room. He was faced by a senior official wearing the gold and dark blue braid of the Administration's financial division. Avon took a seat. The questioning was run of the mill, concerning the financial status of the planet Skat and the inevitable questions of residual rights to minerals, airspace, and the fact that the Federation retained the right to use up to forty percent of the planet's surface for military purposes if the need arose. The Federation, it seemed, would choose which forty percent. Avon made up information about the other life forms on the planet, assured the unnamed official that it was all non-sentient, told him that there were no other planets in the area that were the slightest bit habitable, and that this was why, as their record books showed, the planet had been colonised some five hundred years before only to find itself unable to persuade others to come out and visit. They had not even known of the Federation until a short while ago, so lacking were they in basic technological equipment. Only when a broken-down Federation ship happened on them was the secret of interstellar flight rediscovered. And now the decision had been taken to rejoin the fold of mankind and end the isolation that had lasted on the planet for half a thousand years.

Avon enjoyed his speech. It was so very different from anything he would normally do, and he found himself rather good at it. He resisted the temptation to elaborate too much. It had to sound as if he had explained the story too many times before.

The official was bored. He pressed contacts and gave Avon his clearance to enter the Dome for the specific purpose of discussing trade relations and funding. 'You will need to contact Finance-7,' the official concluded. Avon feigned surprise. The guard yawned, took a final look at the screen in front of him (but hidden from Avon's gaze) and then got up and left without a word. Avon moved to follow, but was beaten to the door by the entry of a more senior (or at least less bored) officer. He pushed Avon back to his chair with ill conceived disdain. 'You are Morstern Jarno?' asked the new official.

'I am.'

'Are you sure you have never been known by any other name?'

'Quite sure.'

'Like perhaps Kerr Avon?'

Avon pressed hard on the contact of the bracelet on his left wrist. On board the docked *Revenge* the battle stations command echoed through the empty ship.

Vila awoke slowly. Part of him felt as if it were suffering from the greatest hangover of all time. Another part felt refreshed and happy. The problem was he wasn't sure which part was which. The thief rubbed the back of his neck, in case someone had hit him, but he found no bump. He looked up at the screens, and the sight that met his eyes brought him back to life. Most of the sky around the planet was now covered by space ships of varying shapes, sizes and allegiances. The tendency spotted by Terminal Computer before it had shut down had come to fruition. The first major battle of the Civil War was being fought in the skies above Vila's head. Without thinking, Vila punched controls on Terminal Computer to bring some of the scenes into sharper focus, but nothing happened. He repeated the commands but to no avail.

‘Vila!’ It was KAT. ‘Sir, if I may be so bold, you should listen to me sometimes. Terminal Computer has been taken over by the sonic beams of Ghammar. Sir, it is totally dysfunctional. Fortunately the Ghammarans are exercising their forces over such a wide area that the signal is weaker than before. I was able to remove some of the controls prior to the power becoming too great.’

‘So what brought me round?’

‘The planet is now isolated from tarriel cell interference since all commands have to be passed through me.’

‘You mean you are running this planet?’

‘Alas no Sir, that is beyond my capacities although I am working on it. However I do control life support, security and that sort of thing.’

‘And can you also tell me what the Ghammarans are doing turning up in the middle of a battle between Servalan, the Federation’s Military Command and the Administration?’

‘Again, Sir, alas, no.’

‘Thank you for that simple answer.’

‘But I can tell you that the Ghammarans appear to have neutralised the ships of the opposing forces. They are working their way through the fleets now without resistance.’

‘Marvellous. The Galaxy is about to be overrun by people from the planet we just tricked out of a teleport device, I’m sitting here unable to move and Avon is down on Earth fiddling with the currency computer of an Administration that is about to cease to exist. I need a drink.’

‘No,’ said KAT to Vila’s total surprise.

‘What do you mean "no"? Since when did you become teetotal?’

‘Sir, I have always been able to restrain myself when the task in hand was more important than a drink or injection of other intoxicating substances. Look at the screens Sir.’

Avon stepped forward into the cell. If he realised the irony of his situation he didn't show it. The last cell he had been held captive in had been on Gauda Prime and his warder had been Korell.

Avon checked the room carefully. The walls were whitewashed and otherwise bare. The door appeared to be a standard military treble-reinforced affair with a handprint lock which Vila would undoubtedly have been able to bypass, but was not something that Avon could solve. In the top right hand corner was an observation camera. Below it was the single piece of furniture – a hard bed. Avon sat down and waited.

Moments later four guards came to the cell, removed him with all the violence they could muster and pushed him down the brightly lit corridor past more cell doors into a reception room. By the time he arrived much of Avon's anatomy was bruised, bleeding or both.

Sitting at an impressive desk facing the doorway was a senior official of the Administration wearing the arm decorations of an Official Interrogator. The woman looked across the desk at Avon, flanked by the guards. He was not invited to sit. A cruel smile played across her face. This, she knew, was going to be her day.

'You are Kerr Avon, one of the ten most wanted men in the Federation.' She announced the fact with ill concealed pride. She promised herself she was going to dine out on every moment of this interview for the rest of her life.

Avon had taken his decision in the cell. Denying the charge could only buy a small amount of time and a lot of pain, and that time would only be valuable if Korell was on her way, which he rather doubted. 'You have me at a disadvantage,' he said with a smile which hurt his lips.

'That is how it is supposed to be,' replied the Interrogator returning the smile. Beneath the hardness and ingrained violence the woman could once

have been attractive. Now the lines on her face showed only the enjoyment of inflicting pain.

Probably a psychopath thought Avon. He logged the thought. Even psychopaths have weaknesses.

‘You have come back to Earth, Kerr Avon. What was your plan? And don’t tell me it was to negotiate credits with Finance-7. Is it Blake? Where is he?’

‘Incorrect assumptions, Interrogator,’ replied Avon quickly. ‘The planet Skat exists and I am its official negotiator.’

‘Don’t play with me Avon. You may have tricked lesser mortals during your years on the run, but this time you’ve tried your luck too far. This is Earth, and this is the heart of the Administration, and I hold the rank of Senior Consultant Interrogator. You’ll get away with nothing here.’ Despite her speech the Interrogator was still enjoying herself. It was as if she wanted the interview to take a long time so that she could break him down. With care she could bring in not just Avon, but also Blake, Vila, Cally, Soolin –the whole lot of them. ‘I find it hard to believe,’ she continued, ‘that the almighty Avon, arch criminal with Blake, has now settled down to be financial advisor to a planet humbly taking its place within a Federation which he and Blake aimed to destroy.’

‘That, Interrogator, is a simplification of the truth which even the Administration ought not to make. I have used the planet as a base because I needed a base on which to work. However, and not for the first time, I have decided to come to your aid.’

‘And exactly how are you coming to my aid?’ The Interrogator had a half feeling that this was not the line that the questioning ought to be taking.

‘A major revolt is about to be started by Servalan...’

The Interrogator’s laugh made Avon pause. It was raucous – far louder than seemed possible from such a slight frame. ‘You are too late, Avon. You are losing your touch. Servalan has launched her attack.’

‘Then you have few moments left,’ Avon told her. ‘As soon as Servalan moves in the Ghammarans will counter attack, and they have a weapon which will disable everything you have.’

‘You are making it up Avon. Your crimes are clear. But this time you will not be sent to a penal colony. You will be put on display as a lesson to all the other malcontents. We’ll leave your brain functioning but suspend the rest of your miserable body in eternal animation. You’ll be a total cripple, Avon, moved from planet to planet to show off to all the other little men who grow too big and think they can take on the Administration. Now, enough nonsense. Where is Blake?’

‘Blake is dead,’ said Avon his temper rising, ‘And, before you get any further carried away with your own insanity, check the latest battle reports from the fleet, because I am the only person who knows how to counter the force of the Ghammarans and with me dead or out of action there is nothing to stop their total overthrow of the Administration and its precious Federation.’

The Interrogator sneered. ‘I’ve never heard of the Ghammarans. Avon, you do not seriously suggest...’

Something in Avon’s face made the Interrogator stop despite herself. She turned to a screen on her desk and pushed three contacts giving code messages in response to buzzes coming from the screen. She recognised the implications of her information at once.

‘Let us assume,’ she stated casually, ‘that there is something in what you say. What do you offer the Administration that will be of interest to it?’

‘Computer knowledge,’ said Avon simply.

The Interrogator laughed. ‘We have our own experts Avon,’ she said.

‘Then call them in,’ said Avon, ‘and let them evaluate the situation and my knowledge.’

A light flashed on the Interrogator’s desk. She pressed a contact, and the door slid open. Korell walked in, smiling as ever.

‘Defences,’ said Vila to himself. ‘That’s what we need. Armaments. And defences. And a force field. Terminal Computer.’ As he spoke he remembered the mainframe’s problem. He turned to KAT. ‘Do we have defences on this planet?’ he asked hopefully.

‘The planet is unarmed, but does have primitive shielding, anti-glare screens, quantra locking on all hatches...’ Vila stopped listening, groaned and sank back into his chair. KAT tried further reassurance. ‘The doors are all sealed, and there is nothing on the surface to suggest that the planet is occupied by anything other than the latest mutations. It is also still severely cold on the planet’s surface, which will make it impossible for anyone to travel more than the smallest distances. You should remain unharmed and safe as long as you do not venture onto the surface.’

‘Tell my heart that,’ said Vila. ‘It doesn’t seem to accept computer logic.’ He looked back at the screens in dismay. Ships from all fleets seemed to be constantly drifting closer. As he watched he saw one ship head too quickly towards the surface of Terminal and the subsequent vibration from the crash could be felt even deep in the interior. There was silence, until a second ship came down. This one seemed to be more under control, almost as if it were still being piloted down despite the loss of computer guidance. Even in his state of panic Vila could spare half a second of admiration for that sort of piloting.

As the ship manoeuvred towards the gloom of the planet’s surface Vila could make out its markings. It was an Administration ship, a ceremonial craft refurbished as a war cruiser by the look of things. The pilot appeared to have some sort of idea where he was heading as the ship glided gently through the thin atmosphere. But even the expert at the controls had difficulties at the last moment and the ship crashed, with a sickening thud, to a halt a few hundred yards away from the main air locks and entrance to the tunnels.

In the darkness Vila could just about make out the main air locks on the ship opening, and a single figure emerging. He had a slight limp.

‘Can’t we put some light on him?’ asked Vila.

‘Only if you wish to advertise your presence,’ replied KAT. ‘The animals will get him.’

And, as the machine spoke, Vila saw a tall grey figure appear from behind the ship. The object must have only recently evolved for Vila could not recall seeing anything quite like it before even on this forsaken planet. Something strange had happened to the creature. The two front legs were used for walking in a slow ponderous way, but the back legs appeared to reach over the body and act as grotesque arms ending in six long pointed fingers. The body itself was covered in a dark thick fur and in the gloom it was difficult to see where body ended and head began. But what there was no mistaking was the mouth. It was huge – half as large as the rest of the creature and alternatively snapping with vast teeth and lashing out with a giant red tongue. On top the ears merged with a vast pointed horn. The eyes too, evolved for the planet’s current dark climate, were huge – almost pulsating. Vila could feel the thuds as the creature made its way towards the hobbling stranger.

For once Vila had the start of what was almost an insight. ‘What made him leave his ship?’ he asked half to himself. KAT offered no opinion. ‘I mean it’s freezing cold out there, and there are the creatures – so why does he get out of his ship?’ Vila could have said (but he didn’t because the thought was too worrying to acknowledge) that it was almost as if the man knew where he was going. And where he was going was towards the main entry lock with the creature not far behind.

Handicapped by a limp and the cold the man’s progress was painfully slow, but it did take him to within a few feet of the secondary hatch which Avon had initially used to gain access to the underground passages of Terminal. On top of the hatch was one of the cameras that was used to keep

an eye on the surface. As the man made it to within a few feet of the camera position the creature made its first attack – half shuffle, half hop, mouth open so wide it was possible to see the furrows on the bright red tongue and count the searing white teeth. The man turned at the last moment and pulled a weapon. The creature, shot in the mouth, reared backwards, its hind feet flapping in the air. As it fell one leg came down towards the man, lacerating him badly so that he fell onto the frozen ground under the impact.

As he fell Vila saw two things. One was a second creature emerging from the gloom. But that hardly seemed to register in his mind. What grabbed his attention and held him paralysed were the features of the man now desperately trying to pick himself up and resume his journey towards the entry bay. His hair was dark, slightly curly. His nose straight and firm, his eyes deep and piercing. It was a young face, hardened by experience – perhaps too much experience. Beneath the dirt and grime, the scratches and the blood Vila could not fail to recognise it. At the same time the man saw the camera, and caught its movements. He crawled across the hard ground and grabbed it. ‘For pity’s sake,’ he cried, ‘if there’s anyone down there, open up.’

Vila reached across and touched the control mechanism. Half a mile above him, the service hatch opened. For the moment that was all he could do. There was no microphone up to the surface to allow him to communicate with the barely moving form. Either he would see the entrance, have enough strength to climb into the hatchway and take his chance or the second creature would get him. Vila could only watch.

Slowly, painfully, the man half rose. He saw the opening and crawled towards it. With an enormous effort he pulled himself upright on the lid of the hatch and began to climb over. He looked up at the second creature, saw it and fired a shot. But his aim was poor and he merely succeeded in wounding the creature. The man got his legs over into the shaft, but seemed unable to start lowering himself down the ladder. Bleakly he kept peering at

the frightening manifestation that was once more coming at him. Vila touched the controls. The lid of the shaft came down, forcing the man to lower his head, and trapping the pointed fingers of the creature's rear legs. Vila waited and listened for a moment. Either the man had hung on and was now slowly making the climb down the shaft or else he had let go and by now would be lying dead at the bottom of the pit. At least, thought Vila, it was probably a better way to die.

‘Avon certainly does know about the Ghammarans, and he also knows that the only way to overcome their power is to bypass the tarriel cells.’ Korell spoke as if nothing had changed. Her voice and her manner were all as they had always been.

The Interrogator was unimpressed. ‘Everything runs on tarriel cells. You cannot bypass everything. The prisoner is obviously lying. I must protest at my official territory as SCI Scanbase being overturned in this way.’

Korell ignored the protests. ‘The Ghammarans have little in the way of weaponry, since they don't need it. They use their sound controls to disable and then they walk in and takeover. If one major weapon system could be converted to work without tarriel cells it could blast them from the skies.’

The Interrogator looked at Avon, at Korell's authority card and scowled in disbelief. ‘Very well. Avon, you will convert one of the central defence complex computers. Chief Commissioner Korell will show you how.’ She rose. Korell remained standing by the door where she had been throughout the interview. ‘Then Avon will be returned to me for further interrogation.’

‘Well now,’ said Avon slowly. ‘That does not seem much of a bargain to me.’

‘You are in no position to bargain,’ said the Interrogator.

‘Your first offer was living-death. Your second offer was to defend your Administration, and then death. I don't like either.’

‘What do you want?’ asked Korell.

‘Don’t you know?’ asked Avon. ‘I had gained the distinct impression that you knew me inside out.’

‘I give you the pleasure of telling us.’

‘I want what I came for. Credit discussions with Finance-7 and safe passage away from Earth.’

The Interrogator stopped Korell replying. ‘Chief Commissioner, I protest. It would be insane to accept terms from a criminal.’

‘If you don’t think the Administration is worth safe passage...’

Korell took a quick look in the Interrogator’s eyes and stepped forward. ‘Under the special powers invested in me by the President of the Federation and Sovereign Power of the Inner and Outer worlds I must overrule any feelings you have, Senior Consultant.’ She placed a second small card on the desk in front of the Interrogator. It had the a desired effect. ‘With your permission Interrogator,’ she continued, emphasising the words, allowing the older woman to regain as much of her dignity as she wanted, ‘I shall take this man to begin work on the central defence computer complex. In return for the successful completion of the mission he shall have all he asks.’ Korell turned, opened the door with a slight pressure of her right hand on the pad and let Avon step in front of her. As they walked Avon sensed rather than felt the gun pointed at his back.

They proceeded down a drab grey corridor past unmarked doors. For Avon it was a helpful walk, adding to his knowledge of the local topography. At the third intersection they turned into a narrower passage and Korell told Avon to stop. She pressed her hand onto a control panel, spoke her name into a box and the door obediently opened for her. Within the room five men were gathered around a main frame computing unit. Parts of the casing had been removed and various components lay scattered on benches. Above, a large screen showed the location of the forces – the Federation in white, Servalan in red, the Ghammarans in blue. Avon glanced casually at where he knew Terminal to be. There were ships all

around the area but the planet itself did not register. Korell showed her authorisation card to the technicians. They stood to attention.

‘This man is Avon. He has knowledge of the attacking forces and of computer systems,’ she announced. ‘He will be in charge of the repairs of the defence system. Borrn,’ she turned to one of the computer workers. ‘Inform Avon of the current situation.’

But before the man could speak Avon stepped forward, his right hand slightly raised, his fingers pointing. He spoke in a relaxed calm manner. ‘There’s no need, I can see what you’ve been up to. The fact that you are still working on the system shows that the Ghammaran weapon has range problems. At this distance it can affect equipment but not people.’ He turned away from the men and looked at Korell. ‘I shall need to have some equipment.’

‘Of course. I shall arrange it.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ Avon replied, his voice heavy with sarcasm. ‘You seem to have influence in the highest of places.’ He looked at her eyes, trying to read them, but she looked back with a carefree relaxed smile that was becoming irritating.

Avon wrote out the list of computer items he needed and Korell left with it. He then turned back to the analysing data banks through which he guessed much of Earth’s defences were channelled. He gave instructions to the five men on parts of the system he wanted dismantled and then turned to the master control board amplifying the signal from Ghammar and watching the results.

‘Vila!’

Vila turned in a hurry. ‘Hello,’ he said quickly. ‘I thought you were dead. I mean I thought you were dead before, and then I thought you were dead just now, I mean...’

‘Vila you are babbling, which is good because it means you really are here. I would hate to think I’d started dreaming about you.’

‘I know I’m here, but what I can’t make out is what you are doing here. I thought you were dead...’

‘Don’t start that again. Let’s take this step by step. Are you here alone?’

‘For the moment, yes. Avon’s on Earth.’

‘Avon! I don’t believe it. You are still with Avon. I thought after Gauda Prime you’d have parted company with him for good, or failing that shot him.’

Vila looked at Tarrant as his erstwhile friend and sometime enemy eased himself off the bed. Tarrant had joined Avon and Vila soon after the battle to save the Galaxy from invasion by the Andromedans. From then on, with Blake seemingly lost forever, Avon and Tarrant had battled for the leadership of the survivors of Blake’s original seven. Tarrant was a good pilot – possibly better even than Korell, but he lacked Avon’s computer knowledge and his impetuosity hampered his ability for self preservation. He had been seriously injured on Gauda Prime as the ship has crashed, but had made it to the control room. Vila had thought him shot by the Federation guards.

‘Not quite shot,’ Tarrant told him. ‘I’d lost a lot of blood, it was as much as I could do to get into the base. Once there I collapsed. The next thing I knew I was still lying on the floor but the place was deserted. I went outside, found an old freighter and got her into the air on my own.’

‘You must have been unconscious for two days,’ Vila told him. ‘I watched you take off.’

Tarrant was staggered. ‘Where were you?’ he demanded.

‘In the next ship.’

‘I went through agony on that freighter and all because I had no one to dress the wounds or to keep watch while I rested. And all the time you were skulking in a ship next door. What made you come out? Rain damage?’

‘The food ran out.’

‘So Avon came and rescued you!’

‘No he did not,’ said Vila. He began to get angry. ‘And if you’ve just come inside to tell me off for not popping in to your space freighter when you wanted me...’

‘No Vila,’ Tarrant told him. ‘I came inside to get away from a ten foot tall red and grey creature out on the surface that certainly wasn’t around last time I was here.’

‘So what brought you here?’

‘There’s a full scale war going on out there – or hadn’t you noticed?’

‘And whose side are you on?’

‘Perhaps I should ask you that. We had a three-cornered fight going between Federation rebels, Servalan’s troops and Loyalist Administration troops when suddenly another fleet of ships come out of nowhere and immediately all our computers stop working and most of the crew go gaga. Fortunately, after the initial attack whatever it was that was affecting people diminished in power. I managed to stay conscious and get the ship under manual. I saw this place looming up out of the nothingness and tried for a landing. This is Terminal.’

Vila agreed that it was.

‘Once I recognised the shape of the place I tried to land close to where the hatches were. I reckoned that control system that was interfering with the computer could start up again at any time and get me too, but with a bit of luck might not work under the ground. I also presumed the Links would all be frozen to death this far out from the sun. I didn’t reckon on those monsters you’ve been breeding out there.’

‘We don’t breed them, they mutate.’ Vila told him. He took a look at the scratches that Tarrant had received and plugged in the automatic medical scanner built into the couch. As it worked, scanning and treating the wounds, Tarrant continued with his story. Injured and alone, drifting

through the outer reaches of the Galaxy, Tarrant had finally brought his freighter to a fringe planet which existed mostly to enhance trade between the Federation and the small number of worlds that survived outside its sphere of influence. There he gained employment as a pilot on a small freighter running between Federation and non-Federation planets. His nose for illegal involvements and adventure quickly led to his becoming involved in a series of off-the-record runs exporting cargoes which the Federation would rather never have had imported, and importing some that they would rather never have seen. As his talent as a pilot became recognised, Tarrant moved up through the ranks until he pushed his luck too far trying to offload herculanium from outside the Federation onto Earth itself. However, before his trial could take place, word passed around that Servalan was about to attack, that many of the armaments supplied in recent months were now worthless and unstable, that many Federation troops could not be relied upon to fight for Earth, and that all in all the situation was desperate. Faced with the option of being tried for what was now defined as a treasonable offence, or working as a pilot for the Administration at a suitable rank and suitable pay Tarrant had chosen the obvious route. He was now recognised as one of the best Administration pilots.

Having completed his story Tarrant relaxed in the recovery couch and listened to Vila's tale in silence. At the end he stretched himself carefully, and feeling no more pain stood up. As Vila led the way to the central control chamber Tarrant summed up the situation.

'Neither of us know what happened on Gauda Prime after Avon shot Blake, and if Avon is telling the truth, he doesn't know either because he was in prison. Added to that you still haven't discovered why Avon shot Blake in the first place. You haven't learned much in your time with Avon.'

Vila was defensive. 'I didn't want to push him too hard. You saw how he was. He could have pointed a gun at me –and fired it. I was bidding my

time.'

'But he certainly knew what he was doing coming here. And he obviously knew what was going on when he refused to work for the Ghammarans. And now on top of everything else he wants to pull off his famous million credit fraud.'

Suddenly Vila realised the implication of telling Tarrant everything. 'You wouldn't split on him would you? I mean you wouldn't report what he's up to to the Administration? We were together a long time Tarrant, you and I. You can keep quiet can't you? I saved you out there...'

'Yes you did Vila, and I'm grateful,' replied Tarrant. 'But I wouldn't shop you anyway. The Administration is simply my employer, and when this little emergency is over they may not even want to be that.'

'But who is going to win?' asked Vila. 'The Ghammarans have got everyone guessing. No one can fly except us.'

'So why don't we fly?' asked Tarrant.

'Because I'm waiting for Avon. Without him we've no credit. Besides, he's the only one who really understands the computer system here, and I'm not sure even he could get it going with everything being bypassed into KAT.'

'But I am a pilot, you forget that Vila.'

'No, Tarrant. I just don't see where we could go. The money is the important part of the plan. Without the credit we'll just be on the run yet again. I'll sit here and wait for Avon. You can stay too if you like.'

Tarrant looked at Vila and then around the control room, as if making up his mind. 'Well I can't fly my ship and I don't want to spend much time outside, so I might as well keep you company Vila,' he said finally. 'At least for the time being.'

Avon handed the com-plate over without a word.

'Will it work?' asked Korell innocently.

‘Oh yes it will work. The problem is, what will come back in return?’

Korell looked at Avon curiously. For once the smile passed from her face, but she held back from any further questioning, preferring to get on with the task of installing the new device. As she turned to the door Avon called her back.

‘You’ll also need this,’ he said, holding out a plastic card. She took it without recognition.

‘What is it?’

‘The program for the com-plate.’ Korell’s frown turned to irritation. Avon allowed a brief smile across his face in suitable ironic contrast. He had, he hoped, annoyed her sufficiently for her to forget, at least for the moment, what he might do when left alone in the defence control room. Korell’s job was now to duplicate the plate along with its programme so that it would work on not only this but also the five identical computer defence rooms situated in the other major domes on Earth. In theory all six defence computers should act in the same way, but in practice there were always small differences in the speed of operation and the route taken through the complex programming. The operators would ignore such small deviations. A few small additions of Avon’s own should also go unnoticed.

Avon finished his final amendment as Korell walked back into the room. He turned to face her.

‘What will it do?’ she demanded.

‘Rework the calculations without tarriel cell interfacing. It will take longer but it still works.’

‘Have you known about that possibility long?’

‘Since I first found Orac. Ensor never made his basic research findings available – just the finished result. So I took the finished work and progressed backwards, and finally found an alternative system possible using Dorian Data.’

‘But is it just as effective?’ For once Korell looked unsure.

‘Dorian Data has very little practical use since the tarriel cell is quicker, cheaper and more accurate. And now that I have completed my half of the bargain it is your turn to complete yours.’

‘Your freedom to return to Terminal?’ As she spoke Korell looked away from Avon and up to the monitor camera tucked away in the roof of the room. ‘You shall have it Avon, but before we allow *Revenge* out of Earth space we need to be satisfied that your com-plate works and that your ship can pass through solar space safely. In fact – ‘and here her old radiance and smile returned – ‘both will happen at once. If the Dorian Data works then the battle with the Ghammarans will be over. The Federation and Servalan forces will be unready for a resumption of fighting and we shall mop up resistance very quickly. The duplications of the plate and programmes will be completed by now. Shall we stay here and watch them work?’

Avon sat passively and watched as the plates were inserted and the program run. At once the tell-tale sound that had dominated the machines since the Ghammarans’ attack disappeared. As they watched the Administration ships responded to orders and reopened fire, attacking in sequence the ships of Ghammar and Servalan, although the rebel Federation forces of Yarddyn were left alone. Lights on the screen flared, blinked and went out as ships were destroyed. As the moments passed the ships of Servalan’s fleet and those of the Federation reorganised themselves and recovered from the effect of the Ghammaran interference, resuming the attack although so out of position and so seriously depleted they made little of their opportunity. Only the Ghammaran fleet failed to respond as projected. Instead of cutting and running, having found their prime weapon overcome, they started moving at growing speeds towards Earth.

Korell turned to Avon. ‘Your doing?’ she asked. There was no malice in her voice, no anger. It was as if she had expected a trick.

‘Something like that,’ Avon told her. ‘And it can be undone. Just as tarriel cell technology can be inverted to produce beams which inhibit

everything from weaponry systems to the simplest programming, so can Dorian Data. And the inversion can be used to draw people towards you. The defences are drawing them in.' Avon paused as he saw Korell move to switch the defence shield off. 'Do that and you open the way to tarriel interference once more. I will remove the inversion once I am safely on board *Revenge* and on my way back to Terminal. You, Korell, will come with me to ensure my good conduct.'

Showing no surprise, Korell agreed. Senior officials were informed and passes issued. Under armed guard Korell and Avon were escorted back to the ship.

'Defence Killer 7 to pilot.'

Tarrant picked up his communicator in surprise. It was about five inches long and less than half an inch wide; holding it registered his presence and allowed his communication back to the ship. In the hands of anyone else it would have refused to work. 'Pilot to Defence Killer 7. Meritt, have you got control back?'

'Yes sir and the battle has been resumed. We're wiping Servalan off the face of the Galaxy. The Rebel Federation forces are fleeing, but the Ghammarans are advancing on Earth. We are ordered in sir. Can you return to the ship?'

'Yes... No.' Tarrant removed his hand from the contact and spoke to Vila. 'Are those creatures out there all the time?'

'They've probably mutated into something else by now,' Vila told him solemnly. 'You'll be safer here. I should stay if I were you.'

'Not a chance,' Tarrant told him. 'This whole affair smells of being one of Avon's tricks. Avon goes to Ghammar and the Ghammarans attack with a disabling weapon. Avon goes to Earth and the weapon is turned off so that we mop up the opposition. The Ghammarans then move in on Earth.'

'You mean Avon did a deal with the Ghammarans after all?'

‘Wake up Vila,’ said Tarrant tersely. ‘He never told you what was going on in the past and he hasn’t started yet. He uses you, just like he used all of us on *Liberator* and *Scorpio*.’

‘So what’s he doing on Earth?’

‘For all I know he’s probably convinced the Administration that their best interests are served in doing a deal with him. He plays the cards all ways, Vila, and all ways lead to the best deal for Avon.’ Tarrant put his hand back on his communicator. ‘This is the pilot. I’m in an underground city about half a mile from the ship. I’m going to start working my way to the surface now. There are creatures on the surface from which I’ll need protection. I’ll contact you again when I reach the exit port. Get lights and weaponry aimed at the area 120 degrees from the ship.’

Tarrant’s signal was formally acknowledged. He turned to Vila. ‘You could come too.’

‘What – out there with those creatures? You must be joking Tarrant. And what do I get at the end of it? Another prison sentence on Earth? Anyway, why come and be bullied by you rather than Avon? It makes no difference, Tarrant. You or Avon, it doesn’t matter.’ He looked desperately sad. ‘I’ll stay here.’

‘It’s your choice,’ said Tarrant. He pulled on his coat, walked to the door and then paused. ‘And thanks for saving my life.’

Vila looked away. His face was a strange mixture of emotions. ‘Think nothing of it,’ he said as he touched the controls to bring into focus the exit that Tarrant would soon be using on the surface.

Vila stayed at his position staring at the screen as the newly evolved snow-covered mammoths appeared, lumbering towards Tarrant. They were over twenty feet tall and fifty feet long including the large bone structures that started above the eyes, pointed forward and ended in massive horns which they used as snow ploughs. They were too slow to worry Tarrant directly although they did cause him to divert from a direct path to his ship.

Vila continued to watch as a pack of pure white tigers, almost invisible against the snow, attacked and Tarrant fell for the first, and then second time. But by then his eyes had long since stopped relaying to his brain what was on the screen.

‘Still calculating, Avon?’

Avon had heard Korell enter the freight bay where he was still working on the equipment he had gathered from the Ghammarans. He stayed with his work and said nothing.

‘Don’t you ever give up?’ Korell’s smile and calmness were still there but since she had rescued him on Earth her voice had changed subtly, giving a barely discernible extra edge to everything she said. Avon, who had listened to her so much over the past months, heard it and recognised it. ‘What is it you are looking for Avon?’ She paused. There was no reply. ‘Fame isn’t enough for you is it? Everyone in the Galaxy knows of Kerr Avon. You could fly into any one of a million planets and have vidcrews chasing you for interviews along with Federation troops chasing you for arrest. But that’s not it, is it Avon? Something else drives you. And it’s not the credits.’ Korell walked round the hold inspecting the work Avon had been involved in. ‘Everyone knows you failed in the big theft, but if anything that enhanced your reputation. And now you’ve got double the amount and your pride can be satisfied.’ He looked up at her. ‘Avon, I am not such a total fool as not to know what you were doing while I was out of the control room. A little sub-routine out of the battle computers and into Finance-7, I imagine. Anytime someone suspects a fault in the logic of Finance-7 the last place they will look is in the programming of Defence Computer-3.’ Avon retained his silence.

‘But that was only a diversion wasn’t it Avon? You never cared about the money. You had no dreams of what to do with it did you? What does Kerr Avon do with credit? He is already the anti-hero of a whole Galaxy. He could command any sum just to lend his name to a revolution attempt at any place in the Milky Way. Or to solve some irritating little computer problem even on an Inner World. Avon could drive forever on Terminal up and down the Galaxy, just as he could on *Liberator* after Blake disappeared.’ She paused. There was as near silence as is ever possible on a fusion-powered spaceship. ‘What is it Avon? What do you want?’

Korell gave a strong heavy emphasis to the last sentence. These were the questions she should have been asking on Gauda Prime. Avon looked up. ‘Peace and quiet,’ he said. ‘Get out.’

Korell would not go. ‘So it is something else that drives you on Kerr Avon? I wonder what that could be. Is it MIND?’

Avon looked up sharply. Korell was behind him, unable to look into his eyes which she wanted to do. But the reaction gave her enough insight.

‘Yes, it’s MIND,’ Korell continued. ‘You are haunted by the thought that somewhere out there is something or someone who knows a lot more about computers than you do. Oh I know your great philosophy about everyone else being a fool. No one matters but number one. But that breaks down when someone or something else starts pushing you around.

‘Ensor was your equal but in a different field, he designed a new system. So did Muller. Your great talent, what made Avon the famous unbeatable Kerr Avon was the ability to take a system and rebuild it for a new purpose. Ensor and Muller started from scratch working in splendid isolation in wonderful little laboratories where assistants came and fetched and carried. You worked in the field, doing everything yourself. You take other people’s systems and turn them upside down.’

At last Avon had to speak. ‘It’s good to know who I am at last. Now if you have nothing better to do why don’t you pilot this ship back to

Terminal?’

‘Because my interest is in you Avon. It always has been in you. Don’t you realise that when you die everything that you have worked to achieve will be lost? You have developed a whole technology of machine manipulation Avon. You are that technology. No one else can do it. Unless someone learns it from you it will be lost to mankind when you die.’

‘Poor mankind,’ said Avon. ‘I feel sorry.’ His voice was thick with sarcasm.

‘But now you’re off on a new track following MIND. Was it MIND that told you to kill Blake?’

‘If you are so interested in finding out about MIND,’ said Avon, ‘navigate us back to Terminal without being hit by one of those ships,’ and with a touch of a contact the screen above them revealed one hundred square spacially liberally peppered with ships of all kinds. Some were in a bad way, some had been abandoned totally, some were still fighting, and some were clearly making their way towards *Revenge*.

‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’ said Korell as she led the way at full speed back to the bridge.

‘You seemed to be engrossed,’ replied Avon, following her and taking up his position.

With all the skill available to her, Korell took *Revenge* through a series of manoeuvres which avoided those ships heading in their direction, and around most of the action. As they completed the twists and turns and approached Terminal from above its pointed north pole, she returned to the previous conversation.

‘What is MIND Avon?’

‘It stands for Machine Induced Neural Directives. A machine that talks directly to the brain. It is a clever notion.’

‘But no more than that?’

‘It is much more than a machine. Machines, even sophisticated machines like Orac, are still machines and are dependent upon either pure logic or the emotions induced by the maker. MIND is free from such restrictions.’

‘You mean it genuinely thinks creatively?’

‘And it is free to transmit thoughts to organic beings.’

‘Such as Kerr Avon.’

‘From time to time.’

‘So it really is important.’

‘That’s for you to decide. I make my own decisions.’

Korell stood in front of Avon, and asked the one question that was left. ‘Do you know where MIND is?’

Avon stood to face her. He put his right hand behind her neck, pulled her to him and kissed her hard on the lips. But before the situation could develop, the battle alarms started to ring across the flight deck. A surprise move by a small group of Administration craft had brought them to within close proximity of *Revenge* and Korell was forced to send the ship in a wide arc to avoid too close an investigation.

‘Friends of yours?’ asked Avon sarcastically as the ships opened fire.

Korell refrained from replying, taking the ship into an erratic ellipse around Terminal. As they orbited the planet from above the ellipse got larger to account for the shape of the planet. The replotting of the course was undertaken totally by Korell without computer aid. The Administration ships flying by computer found themselves following more logical paths which took them away from, rather than towards *Revenge*. Eventually they lost interest in the unmarked freighter and pulled away to find more promising foes to fire at.

Korell landed the ship within twenty yards of the entry port. As they landed she called Vila who thankfully was neither drunk nor asleep and managed to operate the hatch controls successfully. Momentarily Avon left the bridge and ran back to the hold. He came back with just one item, a

small flat container about one foot long and less than a quarter of an inch thick. As Korell joined him at the main airlock they did a quick scan for animals, saw none and ran to the open entry bay as fast as their space suits would allow.

Avon had no time for discussion as they re-entered the control room on Terminal. Within seconds he was conducting a full sweep of the sky above their position. Immediately he pointed with the forefinger of his right hand at the central screen. There in the middle of the welter of drifting ships was a space vehicle totally unlike anything he had ever seen before. It was flaming red in colour with two black lines diagonally crossing it. But it wasn't so much the colour of the object that attracted attention as the design – it was a sphere, rotating slowly about its own axis. Only Vila had ever seen it before – as he told the others several times in the next thirty seconds. It was the machine he had seen on Gauda Prime after he had first entered *Revenge*. As the crew of Terminal watched, it twisted and turned carefully through the ships and debris, seemingly moving from one to another at random but always keeping Terminal at the same distance. Suddenly without warning one of the ships the sphere was investigating broke out of position, trying to effect rapid escape. As it did the sphere opened fire, damaging the fleeing vessel almost at once. With nowhere else to turn the vessel began to tumble towards Terminal.

‘Is Terminal Computer back on line?’ demanded Avon.

‘Er yes, I think so...’ replied Vila. He felt it unjust that greater credit had not come his way for having seen the sphere before.

Avon punched the contacts. ‘Terminal Computer, which fleet does the ship come from that has just crashed on the planet?’ demanded Avon.

‘Servalan’s,’ replied the computer.

‘Then at least we needn’t worry about rescuing the crew,’ said Vila.

‘No wait,’ said Korell. ‘We may be able to gain some information from the captain about the strength of forces –and about the sphere. With the way

the sphere cut it down it might be able to knock this whole planet out of the skies.'

To both Korell's and Vila's surprise Avon did not try to argue. He looked at Korell curiously, as a broad grin moved across his face. 'Open the entry port Vila,' he said. Avon's voice was curiously flat. Vila did as he was told.

Only two people emerged from the ship. Both seemed ill-equipped to walk across the frozen surface of Terminal, even for just a few hundred yards, and one particularly appeared to be wearing footwear that actually made walking on any surface difficult.

The tigers and mammoths that Vila had witnessed at Tarrant's departure had now passed on and been replaced by nothing more harmful than a race of long thin-bodied bats, which frightened and annoyed the visitors but certainly had no ability to harm them.

Through the gloom it was hard to make out the identity of the two, save to say that one was female. It was not until the first of the two reached the spotlight at the top of the descent stairs that Vila realised he was letting Servalan into Terminal.

Avon seemed far from surprised, turning to greet her only at the last moment as she entered, closely followed by Federation Captain Telon.

'Avon, we simply cannot go on meeting like this,' Servalan announced cheerfully, walking straight across the room and taking a chair. A broad smile stayed on her face. 'And Vila too, of course, always faithfully by his master's side. And Korell.' Servalan drew her head back. 'Korell you have disappointed me. I hear you have been cavorting with those degenerates in the Administration. Not what I wanted at all. Oh Avon,' she turned with an exaggerated gesture, 'did you know this *charming* young lady worked for me?'

'And for the Administration, and from time to time for herself.'

'Really? My dear little Korell, you have been busy. Well well.'

‘And you Servalan,’ said Avon, rising from his seat but carefully keeping his back to the wall. ‘Your fleet seems to be largely in ruins. And how is Orac?’

‘Yes Orac, such a helpful little fellow until the creatures in those crazy spaceships started interfering with Tarriel Cells.’

‘Where is Orac?’

‘Now Avon, you surely didn’t expect me to bring that box of tricks with me did you? My associate is looking after it. Knowing your ability to be at the very centre of Galactic events, and finding nothing less than the infamous Terminal at the heart of our little battle, I could only conclude you were here. Nice of you to let me in. I do hope the irony of the situation has not escaped your notice.’

‘Is Orac on the ship?’

Servalan ignored Avon’s question. Instead she changed the subject. ‘Avon, you remember my captain, Telon? We all met on Gauda Prime!’ Servalan performed a long series of introductions. Nobody tried to stop her. ‘And now,’ she said as she concluded, ‘it is my turn to ask you some questions. Avon, what is that sphere up there?’

Avon retained his position, arms crossed leaning against a wall, saying nothing. He was for the moment content to stand and watch.

‘Come now Avon, I have Orac. Wouldn’t you like Orac back?’

‘I doubt if you’ll give it to me.’

‘Oh but I would Avon. And helpful Caro too. My troops are poised to take over the Administration. We have suffered some minor setbacks but nothing permanent. The enemies’ weapons are essentially useless. Victory is at hand, and with that victory total power. I admit it would be nice to have Orac around to solve the odd problem, but I think I could manage without it.’

‘You mean Orac refuses to talk to you,’ said Vila brightly. ‘I told you it only talked to Avon.’

‘Orac is in a ship of my fleet. We can do an exchange, Avon. You tell me all about counteracting the Ghammaran weapons, and all about that little sphere, and I’ll give you Orac.’

Looking back on it, Vila felt sure Avon was about to continue the discussion. He seemed in no hurry to reach a conclusion whatsoever. But at that moment Korell acted: she drew a gun. It wasn’t a particularly fast draw but she knew that no one was watching her. As she drew she shot. The laser ray missed Servalan’s heart but took her clean in the stomach. The one look on her face that remained in Vila’s memory was surprise. The one word she spoke, was ‘You.’ It could have been a statement or a question, but there was little energy left in Servalan for the niceties of inflection. Even Captain Telon was too surprised to act. By the time he thought of it Avon had him covered.

Korell’s calmness and smile stayed even as she spoke in bitter tones to the dying woman. ‘Monoceros, Servalan. Remember Monoceros?’

It was unclear if in the best of health Servalan would have remembered the little-known star close by a rebellious Federation planet. Certainly in her present predicament she did not. She slumped to the floor with a hand outstretched. By purest chance it stretched towards Vila. He retreated as far as he could. It seemed an obscene gesture.

‘Monoceros!’ Korell was annoyed at the lack of response from the half dead woman. In fury she kicked her in the ribs. ‘You destroyed half of it, Servalan.’

Vila thought he began to understand. He moved across to Korell to comfort her. ‘She killed your parents there, right? Korell I’m so sorry...’

Korell pushed Vila away, with a touch that sent him tumbling backwards halfway across the room and into the arms of Telon. It gave the captain an opportunity to make a move to save his commander. He didn’t take it.

‘No, of course my parents weren’t on that pathetic little backwater. My parents are Pro-vice Administrators on Earth in the Terran Administration.

But on Monoceros we had an excellent revolution brewing. For years I had forgone the luxury I could have legitimately claimed on Earth as the daughter of senior officials to cultivate that revolution. It was growing. It would have been a wonderful revolt. And then this idiot Commissioner comes along and blows them all to bits.'

Vila was bemused. For the moment the dying Servalan was forgotten at their feet.

'So you had split with your parents to run the revolution on Monoceros?'

'Look, Vila, let me spell it out for you. The Administration has known for years that it is threatened by possible attempts to overthrow its power by fanatical military elements in the Federation. So I and a handful of others had the job of organising occasional revolts in the Fourth sector. The revolt we had brewing in Monoceros could have tied up Federation military forces for centuries. I would have been decorated and honoured and had my position in the Administration more than assured. Then that maniac Servalan found some grievance with the locals and burned up most of them in one go.'

With that Korell sent two further blasts into Servalan, and watched coldly as the former President of the Federation and one time Supreme Commander of its Armed Forces in Space stopped moving and lay motionless on the floor. Korell seemed to feel no further need to explain herself but Vila was unsatisfied.

'You're saying that the Administration deliberately stirred up revolts against the Federation? I don't believe it. Give me another example – some planet I've actually heard of.'

'Gauda Prime,' said Korell.

'You don't mean you and Blake...'

'Blake was a demented wreck by the time we found him. He'd got laser burns, radiation burns, star burns and cerebral burns. Someone had patched him up on a deadbeat planet, but not done a very good job of it. The

Administration took him in, repaired his skin as best they could and restored him to something like a quarter sanity. Then we put him on a nowhere planet and let him start his revolution, except that the poor fellow had been through so much that he'd lost his real ability to lead. He bumbled around and attracted a few idealists with more emotion than sense and lived on his name. It was genuinely sad. Then we told the Federation command he was there fermenting another revolution. Except that by then Blake couldn't even ferment a capsule of soma. We had to keep sending him more supporters to replace the ones he'd just shot because he felt they were Federation agents. And finally out of the blue comes the gallant Avon and company.'

'You mean we weren't part of the plan?' asked Vila.

'Not at all. It didn't matter too much because we'd kept several divisions of the Federation's senior officers on the hop over Blake for nearly a year. But your sudden appearance took everyone by surprise. We had told the Federation command that Blake was on Gauda Prime, but we certainly didn't tell anyone else, and Blake had no real way of communicating beyond that one star system. So I was rushed in to find out what you'd got up to. Only by the time I arrived all I could find was Kerr Avon.'

As Korell finished her explanation she heaved a sigh of relief, letting out the tension of a long campaign. She turned her weapon to one side and brought her mouth close to it, and spoke a soft word of command. In one corner of the room a blue haze began to appear, grew deeper, took shape and turned into an eighteen year-old with cropped hair. As the girl's form completed she stepped forward and handed a ring to Korell. Korell turned to Avon and Vila. 'Let me introduce you,' she said with a smile. 'This is Daareen. Supposed mastermind of Servalan's strategic operations, but in reality, a loyal agent of the Administration.'

The words had little effect on Vila. He continued to stare at the corner from which Daareen had appeared. 'Teleport,' he said. 'You've got

teleport.'

Korell adjusted the ring on her hand and looked at the thief. 'Poor Vila,' she said, 'you still don't follow, do you? It's not about Servalan and Avon – it's not about people at all. It's about systems – technologies – progress. Our Empire has always been based on rational logical thought and that remains the only route of true progress, because rationality supercedes all individual deviance. That has been the strength of the Administration since it was founded one hundred and fifty years ago. And that logical thought reached its summit with Ensor, and through Ensor, Orac. For five years it has been the central aim of the Administration to bring Orac back where it belongs. At the heart of the Federation, on Earth.'

'But Servalan took Orac,' protested Vila, looking down at the grisly corpse on the floor.

'And why do you think Avon had so few worries about letting Orac go? Because he knew that Servalan's political ambition was so great she would use Orac for nothing more than concocting strategies to fight her way back to the Presidency. She didn't even notice when Daareen suggested that she might have a little time with Orac to solve one or two problems, especially since we'd arranged for her to have Caro as well. Caro talked to her, relayed messages from Orac, told her what she wanted to know. After a while she didn't realise that she hadn't seen Orac for days on end. As long as something was there to give Servalan her battle projections she didn't care. It actually took Orac about three weeks to design and test out a teleport system that we could build with materials available on Earth. Servalan didn't even know it had been done.'

Korell turned to Avon. 'I should shoot you here and now. Your kind has no place in the future. You are a vagrant, nothing more. For a while we all respected your technical skill, but once you started tinkering with the idea of MIND you were lost. All these wild games you play; they are meaningless. Skat, and the black hole – a useful theoretical construct, and

probably one of Servalan's best strategies, but it's a dead end. Just like the sound projections of the Ghammarans. One weapon and an effective one too, and you were the only man in the Galaxy who could have found a way of negating it so quickly. The Administration owes you for that, I recognise it. But it is still an aside from the main thrust of development.

'Orac is the first twentieth generation computer and we need more, and you should be using your skills to build them to help us continue to develop. Orac has given us teleport, and within months every Administration ship will have the facility. The existing Federation command structure will be replaced and a new Federation created without the likes of Servalan in control. You could have been part of it, Avon. But there is something rotten in you that is slowly eating you from within. I won't kill you Avon. You've lost yet again. Take your revenge against Blake now. You're dead already.'

Korell looked at Daareen and together they touched elements on their rings. Within seconds they had vanished.

Vila had no hope of explanation from Avon. He looked at the body of Servalan, bent over it, and struggled to pull it to the door. Without a word Captain Telon moved across and gave Vila a hand. Together they pushed the inert form into the extractor bay. The body fell into the central disintegrator easily. Servalan was no more.

By the time Vila and Telon got back to the main control room events had started moving again. The sphere had moved lower whilst the skies above Terminal had cleared as the Administration forces regrouped to make a final assault on the fleets of Servalan and Yardyan. However, one of the captains had clearly either developed the notion that Terminal was a hostile planet, or had the intention of diverting the attention of whatever it was that was in the sphere elsewhere. Whichever the reason the result was clear enough: a

series of plasma bolts were unleashed. A series which would, in time, destroy the whole planet.

‘Get the shields on!’ shouted Avon.

Vila fell into his chair and turned on the defences just in time to deflect the first bolt.

‘Two further bolts running,’ announced Terminal Computer.

‘Keep the shield up,’ called Avon.

‘But the energy drain,’ protested Vila. ‘These things were never built to withstand this sort of bombardment. They were supposed to take little more than meteors.’

‘It doesn’t matter, keep them up,’ Avon replied as a second pair of bolts struck the planetary atmosphere.

‘Why didn’t you kill the women while they were here?’ asked Telon above the vibration.

‘I must be getting soft,’ came the reply. Avon continued watching the screen intently. ‘Now!’ He said it to himself, but loud enough to catch Vila’s attention. A beam was passing out of the sphere. It hit the ship responsible for the bolts, and must have caused some damage, for immediately the attack on Terminal was broken off and the ship made a rapid departure.

Distractedly they watched as the sphere came lower. It landed, gently, only feet away from the main exit bay. A door in the side of the ship opened up and a short ladder came down to the ground. Then all was still. Avon stood up.

‘Bring KAT,’ he said to Vila. ‘And your tool box.’

‘What for?’ Avon began to walk away to the main shaft. ‘I said “what for?”’ repeated Vila, breaking into a run.

‘It is hard to justify your existence at the best of times,’ Avon told him. ‘Without your tools for opening locks it would be impossible.’ And with that he began to climb the long stairway.

‘You are not going into that ship? Avon! What for? Who are they? Telon, are you going too?’ Telon evidently was, although he failed to reply. Finding no answer Vila lowered his voice, but kept talking to himself as he climbed behind Avon. At one stage he paused for a moment and looked back down. They had left the lighting systems on full, illuminating the passageway now two hundred feet below. The possibility of a fall made him feel sick. He clung to the rails, and looked upwards. Avon was making rapid progress. Vila glanced back down one more time. In two hundred years the battery cells would run down and need replacing. Then the lights would go out. Vila carried on climbing.

On the surface the bats seemed to be resting. In fact there were no immediate signs of wild creatures of any variety, although that hardly reassured Vila. Tarrant hadn’t seen the white tigers.

The enormity of the sphere was overwhelming but it wasn’t just the size that impressed Vila. It was more that it seemed impossible that anyone – anything – could have landed so huge an object so close to the target – presuming that the entry port was the target. Avon walked calmly in his space suit across the few feet of frozen ground, with Telon and Vila close behind.

The sphere had put out a series of shafts which dug straight down into the hardened ground, presumably to hold it upright. At least twenty could be seen in the gloom. The single door appeared designed for a conventional humanoid, about seven feet high and three feet wide. From this angle there were no signs of propulsion units, docking hatches, external screens, nor anything else normally associated with a deep spaceship. Black stripes crossed the whole machine.

Avon walked under the shadow of the sphere and put a gloved hand against it. It was perfectly smooth. He pulled a fist back and hit it hard. It gave out no sound. He seemed to be in no hurry to walk inside. Vila, on the other hand, was now starting to get very cold even with the thermal

protection of a Terminal spacesuit. His attitude changed and he urged Avon to abandon his stroll around the ship (which he estimated was going to take about half an hour) and start up the short metal stairway. A loud howl in the background encouraged him to urge Avon even more strongly. At last Avon accepted the suggestion and led the way up the short ladder and pressed on the control panel at the top. The door silently slid back and allowed them to enter an airlock which rapidly closed behind them. The inner door opened and Avon moved forward, drawing his laser gun. Vila did the same, keeping one pace behind, shuffling along uncertainly. Silently Telon brought up the rear.

They were in a short corridor, red and black like the outside of the ship itself. Two armed guards approached but pulled back into a side corridor as soon as they saw the guns. A voice came on the intercom.

‘This ship is now in motion. Please lay down your weapons. If you refuse we will wait until you drop from hunger or thirst. If you try to fight it out we have several hundred armed troops on this ship and you are certain to lose eventually. Lay down your arms.’

‘Avon,’ said Vila. ‘Couldn’t we do as we’re told for once? I don’t fancy starving to death.’

Avon laughed, and laid down his gun. Vila and Telon followed suit. KAT and the tool kit remained on Vila’s shoulder. The guards reappeared and moved forward tentatively. They wore the same red and black stripes on their loose fitting uniforms as seen on the outer hull. With their weapons they indicated the way forward.

It was clear the three men were being led round part of the rim of the ship. Eventually they paused beside a door, which moved back to allow them to enter. Roughly the guards pushed them inside, and by the time they could turn round the door was locked.

Vila inspected the door, glad of a chance to show his professional prowess. Before he could pass an opinion KAT spoke. ‘MIND is near,’ the

machine said.

‘I always said you should lay off the hard stuff,’ said Vila. ‘MIND is a myth. Didn’t you hear Korell?’

Avon stood dead still, right hand slightly raised in characteristic fashion.

‘MIND is on the sphere,’ reiterated KAT.

At that moment the door slid back and two men entered. One carried a weapon, the other a communicator on his wrist. The latter spoke. ‘The transactions in this room will be recorded, as is everything on this ship.’

‘Making an archive?’ asked Vila, but the comment had no effect.

‘Your names?’

Vila had an idea. ‘We are wanted men. The Federation, the Administration, Servalan’s troops, the Ghammarans –they are all after us, and if they know we are on this ship they’ll be bound to attack you. So why don’t you just put us back down on Terminal and we’ll get back into the control room there and stay put, and you won’t have any further problems from us. We’re the enemies of everyone. Just like you, I expect, only for different reasons. Well maybe the same reasons. Or maybe no reasons at all. Or perhaps you’re not enemies of the Federation. Well we’re not either. Not in the full sense. You have your war, we have ours. No point in getting all mixed up is there?’ Vila stopped talking. It wasn’t so much that he had finished saying what he meant to say, as that he had actually lost track of what it all meant.

‘Your name?’ repeated the questioner.

Vila gave the truthful answer. The questioner’s communicator clicked and pictures appeared on the miniature screen.

‘You were with Blake?’

‘Blake, oh yes. We were with Blake. Like I said, enemies of the Federation. You know Blake, greatest outlaw of the age. Died you know...’

‘It seems the computer thinks you are who you say you are. And if you are, the commander would undoubtedly like to see you. Sir. Would you step

this way, Sir?’

Vila was bemused. The weapon which had previously been pointed at him was now raised in ceremonial salute. He was being called Sir. He looked nervously at Avon, who could do nothing but smile back. Vila seemed for a moment to be out of words, but he tried to put on a dignified air as along with Avon and Telon he was shown (rather than led) through further corridors all decorated in the ubiquitous red and black, and into a circular room. It appeared to be an important meeting point on the ship. There were relaxing couches in front of a low level table with firmer chairs around the edges. Half the room was split in two by a mezzanine floor with a spiral staircase linking both levels at the back. Towards one wall near what could be described as the front of the room was a small stage with a lectern. Slightly to the right was a large screen currently showing pictures of the rapidly-receding Terminal.

Interesting though these features were, they were as nothing compared with the one aspect of the room that struck all three men immediately they entered. What they saw, what dominated their total perception, was an enormous engraving etched completely into the wall and running some fifteen feet tall from floor and ceiling. It was undoubtedly designed to be easily visible from both floors and from all points in the room. It also appeared to have holistic properties for as Avon moved to left and right the engraving took on new dimensions. Whichever way it was viewed there could be absolutely no mistake of what it was. A little idealised perhaps, a little unreal, and somewhat larger than life; but still unmistakable. The face of Roj Blake.

‘I wonder if these people know who killed him?’ asked Vila with mock innocence.

The door opened. Two guards appeared dressed in full battle fatigues plus medals and other decorations. The senior of the two spoke formally.

‘Gentlemen, the Captain would be pleased if you would honour us with your presence on the Bridge.’ The guard led the way.

Vila began to play the part, uttering a variety of phrases from ‘Why yes’ and ‘Of course’ through to ‘This way?’ and ‘Oh that way’ as he rapidly lost his sense of direction.

They moved in fact towards the centre of the ship. A door opened and they entered yet another circular room. Vila made a joke about going round in circles. Avon remained silent. Half a dozen people sat at control desks. Around the walls giant screens showed various aspects of nearby and distant space, except in one spot where a red and black flag had been unfurled. The officers at their posts, all neatly decked out in loose fitting red and black, smartly stood to attention as Vila, Avon and Telon entered. The captain staring intently at one of the wall screens took a moment to turn. As she did a broad smile crossed her face. To Vila she was beautiful. More beautiful than Korell. More beautiful than anyone. Everything about her suggested something deeper than Korell, from her heavy fighting boots to her shoulder-length brown hair. There was also something a little disturbing; something vaguely familiar about her.

Whatever reservations Vila had about the woman, they were not enough to make him not want to make full use of the circumstances that fate had pushed him towards. He seemed to be a hero. He had been with Blake from the beginning, and these people seemed to have a thing about Blake. So maybe the captain could have a thing about Vila too.

‘Kerr Avon.’ The captain moved towards Avon with an outstretched hand. Avon took the hand, kissed it gently with mock ceremony and looked at the girl. Vila rubbed his eyes. Just his luck. The woman knew Avon. She was probably his long lost lover. Vila coughed and gained Avon’s attention. ‘Won’t you introduce me to the lady Captain?’ he asked uncertainly.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Avon with feigned politeness. ‘This is Vila Restell. Good at stealing, worse than useless at anything else. And this is Telon, a

captain in what was Servalan's fleet.' He turned back to the Captain of the sphere. 'This is Tor.' He paused for a moment and looked back at the woman. 'Tor Avon. My sister. Also, I presume, if not MIND then the creator and operator of MIND.'

'I see you have been using your little box. Most ingenious.'

'If you mean KAT,' said Vila, 'it was actually discovered by me.'

'But built by my brother,' said Tor. 'He always has been too modest!'

Finding Avon's sister in charge of a ship with a massive hologram of Blake on the wall, combined with the news that Avon had built KAT and then presumably deliberately let him find it, was starting to threaten Vila's sanity. But to have Avon described as modest was too much. Vila asked Tor for more information in the hope it might convince him he wasn't going mad after all.

'The ship is called *Blake's 7*.' The statement didn't help Vila's state of mind. 'It's named after your one-time compatriot and yourselves. It was designed by MIND – which is myself, as you guessed, operating in conjunction with a computer system I designed and which is now fitted into the ship. This is the flag ship of the revolution. We are taking the opportunity of this in-fighting to destroy what remains of Federation and Administration power, and to liberate the Galaxy once and for all.'

'So you are the inheritors of Blake's little visions?'

Tor turned to her brother. 'We never did see eye to eye on political matters, did we? But to my followers you are our heroes. I don't deny that I have got to the exalted position of leader of this revolution partly through happening to be your sister. The New Freedom Party will welcome the chance to pay homage to two of the men who stood beside Blake.'

'That's not all he did,' said Vila quietly.

Tor seemed to relax slightly. She patted both men on the back. 'Come on, I'll get you some food and drink. And we can all offer explanations.'

‘You’ve come a long way since we last met,’ said Avon as they made their way to the higher levels.

‘I just chose an interesting field,’ Tor replied. ‘Neural and tarriel – an interesting combination which produced MIND. But don’t be fooled. MIND has never done a fraction of the things people say it has. Just as the real Blake’s 7 were never like the legend.’ They entered a refectory and sat down to a well stocked table.

‘You know what it was like?’ asked Vila nervously, helping himself to food and noticing the distinct lack of wine.

‘In afterlife images grow bigger. The people need them to help belief.’

‘You wanted Blake dead, and you wanted me to kill him,’ said Avon.

Vila spat out his mouthful of tranyel seeds in honey in surprise.

‘Seeing that you have been carrying around possibly the second most hated woman in the Galaxy for the past few months you’ve probably learned that the Administration used Blake as a pawn to keep the Federation extremists occupied. Blake had already turned into homicidal maniac, but a maniac with a massive following around the Galaxy which was a total embarrassment to the Federation. If people had started seeing what he had become we would never have held the Freedom Party together. When we heard that the Administration had got Blake on an outer world and were using him as a pawn we knew we had to stop the Federation pulling Blake in and showing him to the Galaxy in the state he was in. So I put MIND on Blake and on you, my dear brother.’

‘If Blake was being manipulated by both you and the Administration it’s no wonder he became unstable,’ said Vila.

‘Such is the price of fame.’

‘And when the shooting was over you used MIND to suggest to everyone within the Dome that they were under attack from all sides, and of course they evacuated.’

Tor smiled. 'You are the great survivor, Kerr Avon. I've had you in my sights since the day you found Orac. MIND feeds into Orac – is boosted by Orac. Orac is the greatest aid to the development of neural deviance there has ever been. It was the greatest fortune that the person who should stumble on Orac was you, and not a thoughtless thug like Servalan. I realised that you were getting suspicious when you started chasing after Blake; it took you longer to realise it wasn't the man that was the key but the machine. And even on Gauda Prime you couldn't be sure which it was, so you had to kill Blake and let Orac go just to make sure you had eliminated all possible sources of neural deviance. Poor Blake. There was really no need for him to die at all.'

Suddenly Tor's manner changed. She began to talk more slowly. 'As a reward for your hard work you've become a hero of the people.'

'So what do we get for our troubles?' asked Vila.

'Choose your positions,' Tor announced. 'When the revolution is over in a week or so you can name your place on the High Revolutionary Council. You'll have to work of course; there will be no more creaming off the riches whilst the majority starve. But you will be respected.'

'You mean spend life as a stuffed dummy being paraded in front of the crowds on Revolution Day, Independence Day and probably Tor's birthday too?' Avon said.

'It needn't be like that. This is a people's revolution. We are breaking up the Federation. The way it was held together with fear and armies is over. All the drug-induced labour forces, hardly people at all, existing in domed cities. All the economic methods they used to rape a planet of its minerals, whilst forcing it to borrow from the central banks...'

Vila stopped drinking. 'You're going to change the money supply...'

'It's a minor detail. You'll be given a hero's apartment on Earth in Dome 4. You'll be treated well and have power. But not the sort of power that Servalan wielded.'

‘Only an apartment?’ asked Vila. ‘I thought we might get something a little more spacious... Like a palace or two?’

Tor laughed. ‘This is the Freedom Party revolution. For two centuries the masses have lived in poverty while the few at the top have lived in total luxury. Those days are over.’

‘Another invention?’ asked Avon. ‘The way to end all poverty.’

Tor looked uncertainly at him, then went on speaking more rapidly. ‘The answer was on Skat all the time. Sygnum from the grass. And on Terminal – new ways of producing food. And with the Ghammarans, going off to find new food supplies. But you knew all that. It was there in front of you. The secret on which MIND is built. That is what I really found. A great universal constant on which all life depends. More fundamental than carbon or DNA. An indivisible constant that applies to life everywhere in the Galaxy. Tap into that and you tap into everything. You can communicate with all levels of life. Skat, Terminal, Ghammar, they all found it. On Skat they got sidetracked into looking into new dimensions, apart that is from when your own little box of tricks was creating mental images that blocked everything they were trying to do. On Terminal they let it get out of hand by trying to go too fast. And on Ghammar they only wanted to use it to help develop their sonic interference. They were all blind alleys! Tarriel and neural. That’s the only real battle now, and I shall use machine induced neural deviance for the people. With you by my side, brother, we shall win and I shall be recognised for what I am. The greatest computer genius in the Galaxy. Greater even than the famous Kerr Avon. Together we shall build the final link – a neural teleport.’

Avon looked at his sister curiously. ‘Are you sure you can win this war?’ he asked.

‘This ship is revolutionary and we have three more like it. We have dedicated troops, and most of the destructive work has been done by the rivalries between the various factions. Now the Ghammaran weapons have

been dismantled by some counter beam worked from Earth we can move in.'

'Yes, the counter beam was a fortunate development for your revolution,' said Avon.

Tor refused to recognise fortune. 'As heroes of the Revolution you must rest now, and prepare for our final advance on Earth. I'll show you your rooms.'

They walked slowly through the huge ship to the dormitories high on the eighth level. As she left Vila looked at Avon. 'She's quite mad,' he announced simply.

'Quite probably,' said Avon.

'What's all this business about talking with the plants?'

'It's been a possibility for a long time. There is energy in every life form, and all based on the same basic principles. Find an underlying force behind the principles and you are half way to harnessing the ultimate life force.'

'What does this life force give her?' Vila asked.

'Power. Total power to control. As she says it is probably what is behind MIND itself – a fusion of this basic life force Tor has discovered plus her own computer genius. If it works she should have total control over every single living being in the Galaxy. Whatever she thinks, everyone can think. And like all political fanatics she'll believe that what she feels is the right thing to feel. Blake's ideals were never worth much at the best of times, but they're unlikely to see the light of day under Tor's rule. She will control an empire in a way that was never before imagined. Everyone, everything will live through her in the ultimate merging of carbon and silicon.'

'That's worse than Korell and her Administration,' said Vila. 'It's even worse than Servalan. And you helped set it all up, Avon. They all used you.'

Avon made no reply. He picked up the small red and green striped box Vila had been carrying, and handled it very gently. It contained no control

panels, just two small indentations. On Avon's face was a broad grin. Slowly but inevitably it was turning into a long hard laugh.

Glossary

(From the Index, *Terry Nation's Blake's 7: The Programme Guide compiled by Tony Attwood*)

ADMINISTRATION – Section of the Federation that controlled Earth.

AVON – Native of Earth, one of the leading electronics and computer experts of the age, full name Kerr Avon. He attempted to embezzle 500 million credits from the Federation banking cartel, and upon the failure of the attempt was sent to a penal colony, en route for which he met Blake. Avon was certainly not above blackmail, shooting someone in the back, or even disposing of Vila if that was required for his own survival. His code of logic and practical necessity was heightened by the discovery that his girlfriend had betrayed him in his embezzlement attempt. His ambivalent attitude to Blake meant that he disliked him whilst twice being drawn back to him. Despite Avon's dislike of Vila's cowardice, he was known to admit that the inherent suspicion Vila displayed frequently made him 'right'. Towards the end Avon was clearly developing a form of paranoia due to the constant strain of living on the edge of death.

ROJ BLAKE – Native of Earth. An Alpha Grade engineer, he became leader of the Freedom Party and saw most of his friends murdered by Travis. After brainwashing he renounced his old beliefs at his trial. However after breaking through the mind blocks he was tried again and found guilty of various crimes against young children. After his escape from custody he used Liberator to continue his fight against the

Federation, risking his own life and sometimes the lives of others for the cause. He was seriously injured by Travis on Star One but was reported uninjured by Zen after the Intergalactic War. He finally appeared on Gauda Prime, where he was killed by Avon. At least two Blake clones were made, and one remained alive with a slave girl on an unnamed planet after the Imipak affair.

CALLY – Native of Auron who was exiled because of her involvement in the fight against the Federation. She met Blake whilst planning a solo attack on Saurian Major. Despite the fact that the Auron do not normally have paranormal abilities beyond telepathy, her long association with the crew of Liberator led her to develop abilities of mind-reading, precognition and telekinesis. She remained with Liberator in order to fight the Federation, and died on Terminal following the explosion set by Servalan.

EARTH – Base of the Terran Federation and home planet of all the crew of Scorpio and Liberator except Gan, Cally and Soolin. The inhabitants were kept inside giant domes, and attempts to go outside were considered serious offences. The water and air supplies within the domes were drugged in order to ensure the passive obedience of the populace. Space travellers had set out some 700 years before Blake to explore the galaxy, but Earth remained the most populated planet in the Federation.

ENSOR – Developer of the Tarriel Cell, which all computers on the known planets contained. He also developed a number of new concepts in computer technology and taught some brilliant students, including Muller, before disappearing to Aristo in order to continue his work unhampered. His final achievement was the development of Orac. His son died on board Liberator whilst attempting to force Blake to take the ship to Aristo.

FEDERATION – Abbreviated name for the Terran Federation. A fascist dictatorship set up in the aftermath of the galaxy-wide Atomic Wars, it

controlled thousands of planets (divided into the Inner and Outer Worlds) and was governed by the President and the High Council. An uneasy balance existed between the President and the military wing, Space Command, until Supreme Commander Servalan overthrew the President and set up a military dictatorship. During Servalan's absence on Terminal however, she was in turn overthrown and her supporters killed. There were constant attempts by Federation planets to rebel, but suppression was rigorously enforced. The Federation's greatest problem was a surfeit of human beings below the privileged Alpha Class. Where possible (as on Earth), these people were kept docile through drugs in their air and water supplies. Personal freedom was non-existent under the Federation, and all religions banned. All citizens were required to register their residence and could not move without reregistering. Private transport was prohibited and interplanetary movement was forbidden without a permit. Worlds which were settled by people from Earth but were still outside the Federation were known as the Outer Planets. Once absorbed into the Federation, they became part of the Outer Worlds.

GAN – Native of Zephron. When he saw a Federation guard rape his girlfriend, Gan killed him, was certified insane and had a Limiter placed in his head to stop him killing again. Gan showed great courage and was always willing to use his great physical strength to help others. He also had a strong streak of common sense, although by his own admission he was not particularly bright. He died on Earth during the attempt to destroy Control – the first member of the '7' to be lost.

GAUDA PRIME – Frontier planet, commonly known as GP. Home of Soolin, where her parents were murdered. It was an agricultural world declared an open planet in order to speed up the mining of resources.

ANNA GRANT – Girlfriend of Avon who, working under the name Bartolomew, betrayed him. She also used the name Sula and was married to High Councillor Chesku. Avon finally killed her on Earth.

JENNA – Native of Earth, full name Jenna Stannis. An expert space pilot, she was convicted of smuggling and sentenced to a penal colony, en route for which she met Blake. She clearly had a deep affection for Blake, although never adopting completely his political views. She went missing after leaving the Liberator in a life capsule during the Intergalactic War, and was reported by Zen as being on a hospital ship. On Gauda Prime, Blake stated that she died running a Federation blockade.

LIBERATOR – Space ship found by the crew of *London*, drifting after a space battle. Blake, Jenna and Avon were sent on board to investigate the ship and subsequently commandeered it. It was much faster than anything in the Federation – its maximum speed was about Standard by 12, at which it could run for about two hours before all energy banks would be drained. Known to its manufacturers (The System) as Deep Space Vehicle 2, it contained upon discovery a wealth of clothing, currency and precious stones. It also contained advanced medical facilities, a massive store of food, a rapid re-generating system and a highly developed weaponry system.

LINKS – Ferocious creatures living on Terminal. The result of the Terminal Experiment, they represented what mankind was to become in the future.

DAYNA MELLANBY – Daughter of Hal Mallanby, born on Earth and then taken back to Sarran after her father's revolutionary group had fallen. Dayna developed an early interest in weapons technology. She rescued Avon from the warriors on Sarran and, after her father's death, returned to Liberator with Avon. She apparently died on Gauda Prime.

ORAC – Computer invented by Ensor which had the ability to tap all other computers through the use of a standard component, also invented by Ensor, found in every computer in the galaxy – the Tarriel Cell. Orac used special communication waves that passed into a fifth dimension, the same dimension which allows thought transference. However, Orac had no consciousness in that dimension and was thus not telepathic. It

enjoyed playing Galactic Monopoly, disliked work it considered unnecessary, loved gathering information and had delusions of grandeur. Orac could actually take over other computers and force them to obey its commands. Indeed according to its inventor, Orac was more than a computer; it was a brain. Nevertheless it had definite limitations to its capacity to take in information. Orac was severely damaged to the extent of ceasing operation in the explosions caused by Zukan on Xenon base, but was sufficiently repaired by Avon to be able to track down Blake to Gauda Prime. Orac was not seen during the final shoot-out on the planet, presumably having been left outside the base in a safe place.

PLASMA BOLTS – Main weapon used by Federation Pursuit Ships. Huge balls of glowing, superheated fusion reaction power. Unprotected objects were instantly vaporized. The maximum number of plasma bolts ever fired at one time were the four fired by Travis in Series A Episode 8.

SCORPIO – Wanderer Class planet-hopper Mark II which underwent enormous modification under the direction of Dorian. It was taken over by Avon et al and used until it crashed on Gauda Prime. Unlike *Liberator*, pressurised doors sealed off all areas of *Scorpio* from the flight deck when in space. The ship was under the general control of the computer Slave.

SERVALAN – Native of Earth. Having started out as a cadet, she became Supreme Commander of Space Command. Prior to the Intergalactic War she ousted the President and installed herself total ruler. She was deposed during her enforced isolation on Terminal and adopted the name Sleer, having been rumoured killed during a rear-guard action on Gedden. Using drug control, she initiated a massive conquest of planets which Avon tried to stop.

SOMA – Intoxicating drink that played an important part in the ancient Vedic religion of India, taken from the juice of the plant *Asclepias acida*.

It formed a constituent part of the liquid ‘adrenalin and soma’ much favoured by Vila on board *Liberator*.

SOOLIN – Two stories exist concerning Soolin’s origins. According to one, she was a native of Earth who moved to Darlon IV with her family, who were murdered 6 years later. Aged 17, she killed her parents’ murderers and left the planet to wander the galaxy, linking up with Dorian before becoming a member of *Scorpio*’s crew. In the other version, the events just described were said to have taken place on Gauda Prime, and there she was apparently killed along with Tarrant, Vila and Dayna.

TARRIEL CELL – Development by Ensor at the age of 18 which led to a completely new generation of computers, all of which contained one such cell. It was this unification of development that allowed Orac to tap any computer in the galaxy.

TELEPORT – System of dismantling organic molecules, transporting them across space and then reassembling them. Non-organic molecules that were closely associated with organic molecules (e.g. items of clothing) were also automatically teleported. The teleport system on *Liberator* worked on medium frequencies, but it was possible to adjust the teleport to work on omicron pulse length when there was interference on the medium band. Bracelets had to be worn to make the system work. On *Liberator* these were very fragile indeed and had clearly been designed for use by the Alta of the System. They included sensors which warned of the presence of poison gas or radiation. *Scorpio*’s bracelets were much sturdier and became the personal property of each crew member. They were made of titanium and had chips set in a rack with a keyboard so that the landing site could be programmed into the bracelet.

TERMINAL – Artificial planet built by a consortium of scientists 411 years before the *Liberator* was destroyed within its vicinity. According to official records, Terminal was supposed to have broken up many years

prior to that. Terminal was sprayed with organic materials in the hope that it would naturalise and eventually create and sustain life. Originally positioned in solar orbit near Mars, it was somehow moved to a totally new location. Despite apparently being egg-shaped, the planet retained a breathable atmosphere and Earth-type gravity level. The question of how much of Terminal was colonised remains unresolved. Servalan merely occupied what appeared to be a few rooms underground, although there were further signs of habitation and building elsewhere on the planet. These may, of course, have been built by the Links before they evolved into the aggressive creatures that were met by the crew of *Liberator*.

VILA RESTELL – Native of Earth, and brilliant picker of locks. He met Blake whilst waiting for transportation to Cygnus Alpha and promptly stole his watch. Despite the fact that he acted like a fool, Vila had a very high IQ and claimed to have bought his Delta grading in order to avoid becoming a Space Captain and hence killed. He was first sent to a penal colony at the age of fourteen, but the transportation ship was hit by a meteoroid and he escaped. Although Vila was in many respects a coward, he would not leave another member of the crew to die unless the action was out of sight, the odds against him high, and the bottle close to hand. Hence he risked his own life rescuing Tarrant on Terminal, but failed to help Cally on Obsidian. The nearest he ever came to having a true friend after he became connected with Blake was in Gan, whose straightforward bravery and strength he trusted. However, despite the contempt with which Avon and Vila regarded each other's characters, they subsequently became the closest of all crew members, each recognising the other's exceptional skills and abilities. This was seen at its clearest in episodes such as 'Killer' and 'Gambit' in Series B.